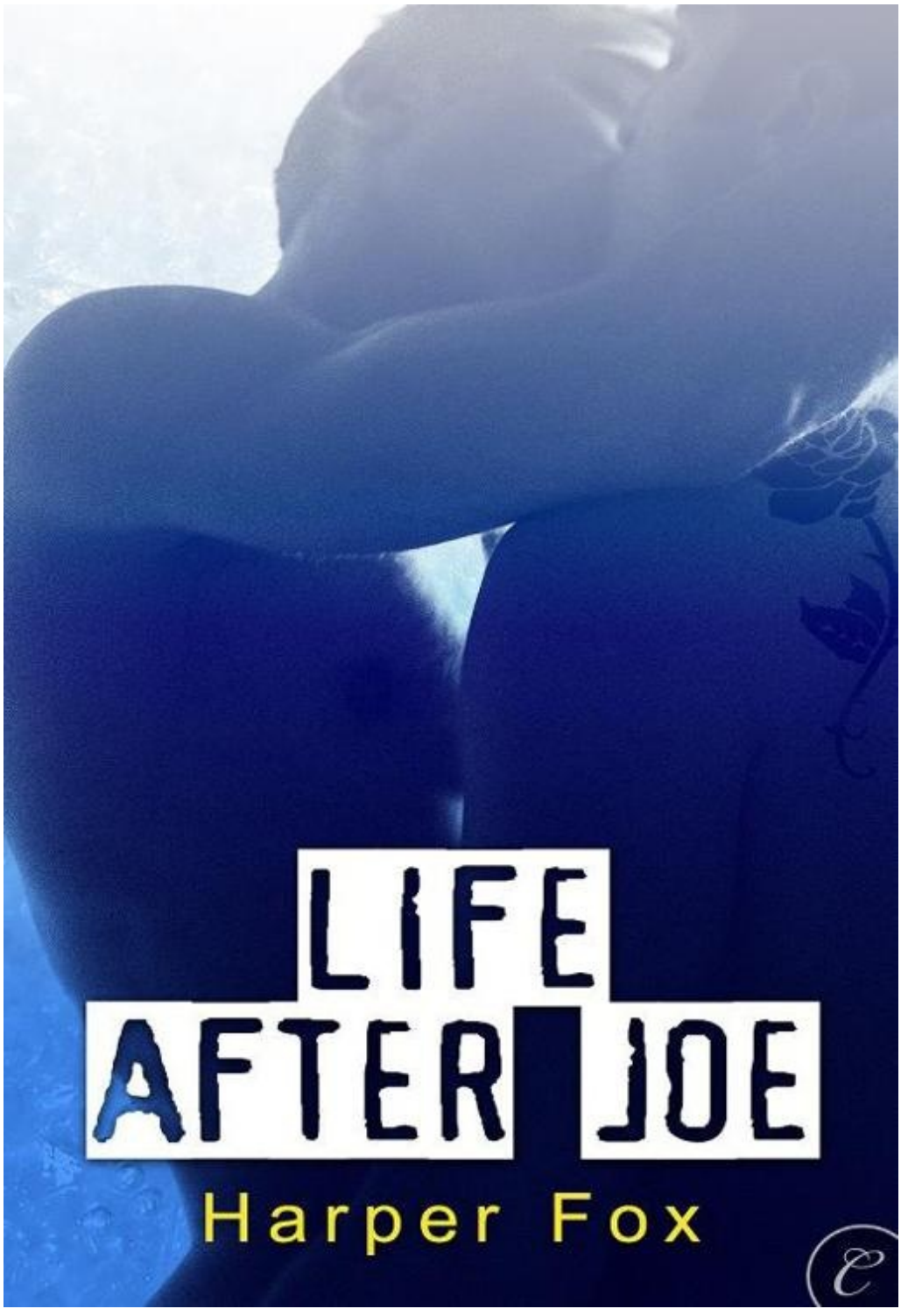

LIFE
AFTER JOE
Harper Fox


LIFE
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Harper Fox



It’s not the breaking up that kills you, it’s the aftermath.

Ever since his longtime lover decided he’d seen the “heterosexual light” Matt’s life has been in a nosedive. Six months of too many missed shifts at the hospital, too much booze, too many men. Matt knows he’s on the verge of losing everything, but he’s finding it hard to care.

Then Matt meets Aaron. He’s gorgeous, intelligent and apparently not interested in being picked up. Still, even after seeing Matt at his worst, he doesn’t turn away. Aaron’s kindness and respect have Matt almost believing he’s worth it—and that there could be life after Joe. But his newfound happiness is threatened when Matt begins to suspect Aaron is hiding something, or someone…

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Life After Joe

Harper Fox



Dedicated to Jane, my beloved first reader
With thanks to Mark and Theresa, who opened their home and their broadband to me in time of crisis!

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Chapter One

December, Northeast England

I concluded, towards midnight in the Powerhouse, it isn't breaking up that kills you. It's the aftermath. This revelation, coming hard on the heels of six or seven shots of JD, seemed momentous. I wanted to communicate it to someone. But that's the problem with the Powerhouse—and the Barking Dog and the rest of the handful of gay dives struggling to hold on through the regeneration of Newcastle upon Tyne's west end—you don't communicate, at least not verbally. A track whose sole lyrics were *riverside, motherfucker* repeated at intervals across its trippy, bone-shaking bass had been circling round the club for the past ten minutes. If I wanted to talk, I'd have to get up close and personal. Right up against someone's ear.

Maybe I could try it with him. The stereotype there at the bar. While I was at it, I could tell him the rules—because there *are* rules down here, even for the heaving sea of flesh and muscle fighting it out on the dance floor, assuming their positions and their partners for the night. You don't come here alone four weekend nights in a row, sit there looking the way he did and not expect to be picked up. Not that he seemed offended by the regular attempts. Whatever his method for repelling boarders, it was quiet. Good-natured, even: most of the rejects had come away smiling.

All right. My turn. If he was the archetype of lonely dignity—dark, impassive, bloody beautiful in the industrial style, all lean muscle under his tight black vest, leather jacket slung across the bar beside him—I was my own kind of caricature, perhaps a match for his. Friends, mirrors and an undamaged ego had once told me I was lovely too. Postgrad-student, promising-young-doctor lovely. Wheat-sheaf fair to his dark. I always got my man. The song said, *riverside, motherfucker,* and it felt like the word of God.

I got to my feet. He was watching me, as expressionlessly as he watched everything and everyone else around here, but I did have his attention. The wheat sheaf got displayed to best advantage if I gave it a casual push back with one hand. I went for the manoeuvre, caught the tinsel banner some festive-

minded fuckwit had thought apt to string around the walls of the city's most hard-core pickup joint and brought the whole lot down.

I slumped back into my seat. I didn't have left inside me whatever it took to be mortified, or even amused. I just didn't fucking care. The trip-hammer rhythm went on. *Riverside, motherfucker.* At the bar, the stereotype had turned so his fine-sculpted profile was all I could see. It was perfectly still. If he was laughing his arse off inside, it was down very deep. Wow. Kind as well as gorgeous. He was definitely breaking every damn rule around here.

I didn't have long to think about it. The bar and the strobing lights were suddenly eclipsed by the substantial form of Lou McNally, my ex-flatmate and self-appointed guardian of my virtue on nights like this. He wasn't very good at it. I'd lost count of my casual scores since Joe had walked out, but I was definitely past single figures. Actually, given the six months and counting that I had been alone, I kind of hoped it wasn't worse than that.

"Matthew!" Lou's voice carried clearly through the bass. Unlike me, he hadn't lost the student trick of nightclub conversation. He carefully set the jug of mojitos I'd demanded as a nightcap down on the table. "Howeh, sunbeam. I know this is going to be a difficult time of year for you, but…" Reaching past me, he rescued the tinsel strands from the beer pools and worse that carpeted the House by the time the dance floors filled on a Saturday night. "No need to spoil it for everyone else." He crashed down beside me and slung an arm round my shoulders. Anyone else I'd have shoved away, or possibly stabbed, but Lou had been almost as constant a presence in my life as Joe. From the same shitty council estate, he'd scrambled along with us into higher education, electing to study medicine more out of habit and a sense of solidarity than any particular desire to benefit humankind. "Come on, Matt," he said, giving me a squeeze, splashing the mojito messily into our shot glasses. "Let's drink up and go home."

I considered it. Lou had been making the same suggestion after every round since about half past nine. If I'd listened the first time, or even the fifth, I might have got out with my dignity. I wanted to explain to him that it wasn't my bloody fault I was here in the first place. Last year at this time—and indeed for the six years before then—I had been home with Joe. Studying, cooking dinner. Maybe even wrapping the odd present. Rolling about on the fireside rug. Christ, we'd even had a dog, now housed with my parents, who clearly saw her as a

poor substitute for the grandchildren a healthier boy would have dumped on them. Joe and me were meant to be forever.

Forever, if only he'd seen it that way and not discreetly conducted a two-year affair of such perfect thoroughness that, when he finally broke it to me, his new life was a done deal. Fait accompli, inarguable. He loved me, always would. But he couldn't live forever in the subculture. He wanted kids. He wanted someone to take home who wouldn't make his mother cry and his dad's face turn apoplectic purple. Basically, he wanted a girl, and over the past two years he had found, wooed and won one. Joe had walked out to get married.

Yes. Not the breaking up that kills you—the bloody aftermath. Not my fault I was back in the Powerhouse, the Dog, the Blue friggin' Banana cruising a singles scene I'd never had to bother with when everyone else my age was pairing off, because I already had my boy, my other, and Joe and I would come here to dance and flirt and maybe even take some lucky third party home with us for fun, so utterly secure were we of each other's unswerving devotion.

But Lou already knew all this. He'd heard it ten times before—more, probably; I was sometimes an amnesiac as well as a maudlin drunk. Further, he'd had a ringside seat for the whole catastrophe. Just as much a friend to Joe as to me, he'd watched it from both sides. Not his place to tell me what was going on, of course, and he'd held his tongue for his own good reasons. But Lou had known. And for all his friendship and support of me in my new single state, that was hard to forgive.

Abruptly I couldn't forgive anyone. Not Joe, not Lou, not the crowd of boys on the dance floor and lounging around the tables. Because they *were* boys: on this circuit, you started looking sheepish if you were still hanging around after the age of twenty-one. Me, Joe and the caricature at the bar were about six years out of the scene's demographic. Worst of all, I couldn't forgive myself for needing to be here. For feeling so desolate, without a skinful, without some stranger's cock up my arse, that I couldn't even stand a weekend night at home by myself…

I lurched out from under Lou's arm. Getting to my feet, I felt him follow, closing a steadying grasp on my elbow that I pretended not to need. "Oh good!" he shouted over the continuing "Riverside" beat. "Going home?"

I shook my head. There was no point in trying to talk, but Lou knew me well enough to translate my sign. I jerked my thumb over my shoulder in the rough direction of the bar and its steadfast, handsome occupant. *Going to get him.*

"What? Oh, don't waste your time. I asked Barman Bob all about him. His name's Aaron. He's an oil rigger. Comes here on his off shifts to drink and watch the boys, and he doesn't want company—not even you, bonny lad, so why don't you forget all about it and come home with Lou while you can still walk?"

An oil rigger? He would be. I found, to my surprise, I could still laugh. Somewhere a Village was missing one of its People. As for *not even you,* that was just a red rag to my drunken bull, the worst thing Lou could have said. He should have known better.

Of course, when I got up close, he wasn't a caricature at all. More of a refinement, I thought, shouldering my way through the scrum at the bar. As if the stereotype had grown up, escaped into serene reality, watching my approach without signs of pleasure or irritation. His eyes were so green I thought he must have been wearing contacts, before deciding he didn't look at all the type. One rose tattoo, which I wished I could see more clearly in the club's fractured light, climbing up over his shoulder. No other decoration about him, not even a ring on the powerful, fine-made hands loosely clasped on the bar. Now I was very close, about to make my move onto the vacant bar stool beside him. Many men had straddled that arduous peak on this night—straddled it and failed. Well, I wasn't dismounting without him…A gap opened up in the crowd, and I slithered through.

I had no chat-up lines. You don't need them when you've practically married your childhood sweetheart, and since the divorce, I'd relied on my looks and my obvious hunger to do the talking for me. He was drinking beer. I pointed to his pint, pointed to Barman Bob and mouthed, *Another?* From here I could see his jet-black hair was sprinkled through with silver, though I didn't think he could be more than a couple of years older than me. The contrasts were, for some reason, a devastating effect. A marring of his perfection, a sign he was prey to age and fate just like the rest of us…

He put out a hand to me. His grip was warm and dry. He closed it on my wrist as if he'd known me for years, as if he could have known I liked to be held that

way. When he spoke, he carried easy through the beat, though his voice was low and soft. Accent local but not Geordie—no, a cultivated landsman's voice, west Cumbrian, maybe. Slowly I tuned in from the feel and the sound of him to what he was actually saying. And then I, like my many predecessors, got off my bar stool and walked away.

Straight, more or less, into the arms of Nicky Harris. For once I didn't mind. You wouldn't catch Nicky, small-time dealer and club rat, laying a hand on your arm and telling you, so gently your heart nearly fell out of your chest into the bartop icebox, you were way too good for this place. *"You're getting wasted. This won't take the pain away."* Christ Almighty. I'd told Bob, Lou, everyone else who knew me and frequented this dive to shut the fuck up about Joe and me. I didn't need the teasing or the pity. Certainly not to have tears cracked up out of my deep-frozen heart by the touch and the words of a stranger. I surveyed Nicky through a haze of them. He didn't look as rough as usual. Anyway, he would do. Inevitably, he was digging in his pockets for something to sell me, and this time when he produced a strip of E, I took one. Dry-swallowed it, grinning at him. When he made a gesture for payment, I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him off through the crowd.

Riverside, motherfucker. The track, obviously a record-length extended mix, thudded on. This close to the speakers, the bass was enough to staple-gun you to the wall. I let it—allowed a momentary fantasy that each beat was a nail, punching through flesh and bone. Ground my spine against the wall, tipping my head back. Nicky was on his knees in front of me. His prickly, hard-gelled crop was nothing like Joe's and nothing like the way I imagined that silver-starred blackness would feel. So much the better. Maybe I should have been down giving him head to pay for the drugs, but I'd known he'd grab the chance to suck me off. He was a lifer in here, as well. He'd hit on me even when Joe was around. Yes, this way would work fine for both of us. No trouble. He'd gone down like a lamb the moment we fell against the first wall, and I'd given him a push to show him how the deal was going to work.

I opened my eyes and saw where Nicky and I had come to rest. Oh God. This was bad. I'd been heading, I supposed, for the House's notorious back room but hadn't made it. We were barely off the dance floor. I'd done some ill-advised screwing in some stupid places over the last few months, but this was spectacular. Already heads were turning in the crowd, the first few hoots going

up. Best of all, we were in good line of sight to the bar…

And he was watching. The caricature. Aaron. For a moment I considered shoving Nicky off my cock and ending the floor show. But why the hell should I? I felt the drug hit the booze in my system and groaned, watching the lights blur, the half circle of faces gathering round become grinning masks. Those incredible eyes were green even from this distance. Well, the supercilious prick wasn't too proud, too bloody dignified, to watch me getting off, was he? Nicky, who'd plainly sucked a lot of cock in his time, was surprisingly good. I thrust into his mouth for a few seconds longer, noting with vague, bitter satisfaction that hands were going to zips in the watching crowd. Yeah, show them all what they were missing. Show *him* in particular. Not too late for the wheat sheaf; I ran a hand through my hair. Grabbed Nicky's shoulders and eased him back to display myself, pulling out almost to the tip. I had a nice big cock, or so I'd been told regularly enough over the past few months: a lifetime of monogamy hadn't offered much chance of comparison.

God, *was* he watching me? His gaze was at once intent and as distant as if he were gazing at ships on the horizon. I didn't know. The beat hammered into me. Nicky, getting impatient, grabbed at my arse to drag me in, tonguing the length of me, letting me feel a graze of teeth. And now I had the problem of finishing what I'd started out here. The one thing more humiliating than my performance so far would be a failure to finish it; to go soft with the JD and the E swilling round in my system, to drown in the misery trying to whelm up from out of my gut. Oh Christ. Hallucinating Joe into the place of whoever was sucking or fucking would usually get me off, at high emotional cost. All right. My own beautiful Joe, who would never be caught dead doing something like this, writhing in front of me, deep-throating my cock. Instead of Nicky's stiff-gelled crown, Joe's hair, warm silk, sliding between my fingers, releasing its clean, familiar smell, the scent of love and home…

Riverside, motherfucker. I sobbed in one breath and released it in a wail no one would hear, not even Nicky. Not even me. Beyond the ring of wankers and spectators, I caught a glimpse of Lou shouldering into his jacket, heading for the door. Great. One more person I'd managed to alienate out of the increasingly tiny handful of souls who gave a shit about me. Joe wasn't going to help me. I felt like I was falling off a cliff. I wasn't gonna come. Gonna lose it, wake up cold and sober, my dick pulling slack out of Nicky's sneering mouth.

The man at the bar shifted. What had Lou said his name was? Aaron? "Aaron," I whispered under the percussion. Why, I don't know. He'd turned me down flat. Tried to send me home like an overwrought kid. Oh, he was looking at me now. Gaze drawn right in from the horizon to the flotsam thrashing around on the beach. *Got you, you bastard. I always get my man. Jerking off under the bar, I bet, on your little moral high ground. How would your shapely gob look wrapped around my cock? How would you feel underneath my hands—broad shoulders, hair like night sky filled with stars?*

Nicky choked. I didn't hear it, just registered the jerking of his head in my grasp. For a second, I was coming so damn hard I didn't care, spending down his throat with a violence that undid my knees and sent me slithering down the wall, shaft tugging out from between his lips before I was done. I hit my hands and knees, still spilling. Down onto the sticky tiles, into the effluence of Saturday night, booze and dirt and my own semen. Instinctively I balled up, throwing one hand over the back of my head. I was just aware of Nicky, whom I'd nearly suffocated, scrambling to his feet, swearing at me and wiping his mouth. Then the biggest bouncer I'd ever seen was surging through the laughing, yelling crowd, and I was leaving earth, shirt collar and waistband of jeans each in one of his kebab-meat fists…The crowd blurred out. There were doors swinging wide and some steps and a rush of night air. I hit concrete. I heard one last time, *riverside, motherfucker.* And the music stopped.

Chapter Two

For the first half hour of my walk home, I barely noticed the cold. To be honest, I barely noticed I was walking. The railway station, the elegant Regency facades of Grainger New Town, seemed to float obligingly past me of their own accord. I was smooth and easy. I was on the moving walkway at the airport taking giant steps. I was skating on ice.

Ice. I put out a hand to steady myself on the rail by the Grey's Monument pedestrian crossing—*careful, Matthew, no sense in all this beautiful striding and skating if you walk straight out under a bus*—and my palm stuck to it. The shudder that ran through me as I jerked my hand away woke my whole body to the temperature of the night around me. A rip in the chemical veil. Through it, I saw the glimmer of frost on the railing. On the pavement, the tarmac. All over my tired, dirty city. A benediction…

To concrete and glass, anyway. On my skin, it was just a dull ache. And I was feeling it because I was out on the streets, fifty-five degrees north, three weeks before Christmas, in my T-shirt. That was because my wallet, and taxi fare, was back in the Powerhouse in the pocket of my jacket, and my jacket was there because the world's biggest bouncer hadn't given me time to pick it up before slinging me out into the street. Which was, in its turn, because I had committed an act of public indecency on the dance floor of a busy nightclub. You had to do a lot to piss off the Powerhouse bouncers, but I supposed that had been enough.

With Nicky, several times arrested for dealing crack outside the Scotswood secondary schools. My stomach heaved, and I grabbed at the rail again. It might have done me good to chuck up a night's worth of toxins there, but Grainger Street was lined with CCTV, and I'd probably end up fitting community service around my first set of foundation exams. A scatter of people were still out on the streets too…

Among them, in the distance, just a graceful shape in the lamplight, was Aaron the Oil Rigger. I straightened up, glad the impulse to vomit had passed. He was still a good way off, but his movements were intent. Too good to talk, too good to dance. Not too good, apparently, to follow me home. A kind of ugly triumph

burned its way through me. I waited a few seconds—didn't want to make it hard for him, did I?—then set off again, not too fast.

Over the monument's open spaces, up Northumberland Street. A pause, as if to admire the Christmas display in Fenwick's windows. Which, this year, I did not. The tableau might be locally famous, but this time around had gone ferociously reactionary, a full-on nativity with bells. So much for the multicultural society. Yeah. Sometimes I could almost see how Joe might have had enough and gone to bat for the winning side. One day I might do the same myself…I grinned at the idea, catching my reflection just under the Virgin's cardboard halo. Plainly and obviously gay from the instant of conception.

And not half as pretty as when I'd set out for the night, that was for sure. I didn't remember landing on the pavement outside the club, but apparently I'd done so at least partially on my face. I winced and dabbed with one finger at the grazing on my cheek, my bust lower lip. Oh yes. Lovely.

Still, good enough to pull the best-looking bloke to grace the Powerhouse in as long as I could remember. I glanced back down the street to make sure I still had him in tow. Long walk from the west-end dives to the elegant little bohemian quarter where Joe and I had taken our first flat after graduation…

No. Not him. A lump of lead worse than nausea slipped down from my heart into my gut. Amongst the scatter of people back at the monument, if I'd bothered to look—Baz and Wayne bloody Parfitt and a couple of their hangers-on. If anything in this world could make Nicky look classy, it was the Parfitt lads, who managed to reconcile occasional homosexuality to a neo-Nazi worldview with a flexibility that astounded me. And now I gave it a thought, hadn't Nicky been keeping company with Wayne over the last few weeks?

Fuck it. Yes. I always got my man. Trouble was, I sometimes got someone else's. As for my beautiful oil rigger, the night had swallowed him. Probably he had just been walking home.

I knew better than to run. Not yet, anyway. A sprint this far from home would leave me short on breath for a fight if it came to that, and with the likes of the Parfitts, it inevitably would. I turned from the windows and set off again, keeping my shoulders—and, I hoped, my line up the street—as straight as I

could. What was Quentin Crisp's rule of thumb in these situations? That few muggers would persist in following a quietly determined four miles an hour for more than a couple of miles…

Perhaps he hadn't encountered a mugger from Scotswood. When I reached the Jesmond station underpass, Wayne and Baz were still doggedly following in my wake. They seemed to have lost their satellites, though. That was good. In my current state, I could almost kid myself I could handle two mean-eyed skinhead bastards on my own. I jogged down the steps and into the dark. A chilly detachment was settling on me like mist. I felt more interest in the rhythm of the flicker of the tunnel's one still-functional neon light than in the footsteps coming up hot and hard behind me. The Parfitts, making their move. So be it. Even a lost fight—a beating—seemed suddenly preferable to my empty flat and another night alone.

At the far end of the tunnel, where the station steps ran steeply down through streetlamp shadows and falling leaves, Baz and Wayne's cronies suddenly appeared. As if they'd dropped out of the sky, although logically I knew they'd only run ahead and jumped the traffic barricades to cross at the junction, which was, on reflection, exactly what I should have done. Not thinking. Stupid, even for a man coming down off a chemical-ethanol high. Maybe it was just bloody entropy. Whatever mystical energy it was that kept people out of these situations was draining out of me at last. Or did I somehow *want* to be down here getting the shit kicked out of me, hopefully propelled into blissful unconsciousness on the tip of Wayne's steel-toed boot…?

I never got the chance. Suddenly there were three silhouettes at the tunnel's far end, not two. One of them was as graceful as a puma. That one moved, and the other two went down with a violence that suggested their little shaven heads had been smacked together. A rich west Cumbrian landsman's voice barked, "Watch your back!" and I whirled to face the Parfitts.

Not much call for bare-knuckle skills in medical school, though the parties could get ugly. I had, however, grown up queer on one of the toughest estates in the Northeast. The first punch I landed felt good. Better because Wayne had judged the poof by his Ted Baker cover and plainly wasn't expecting it. There was something familiar in the feel of teeth breaking under my fist. Well, some kids look back with fondness on model aircraft and grandmother's jam tarts. Yes.

I had knocked down schoolmates, neighbours, random brats in the street—anyone with a bad word to say about how I looked, what I was…

But now I came to think about it—and thinking at this juncture was a really bad idea—nine times out of ten I had lashed out to protect Joe. I didn't mind the shit that got thrown. He hated it. Even at thirteen, he hadn't wanted to be outed in the playground or the gym by some indoctrinated little fucker who had just learned the term *arse bandit*, probably from his dad. Without Joe, what was I fighting for?

I didn't care. Wayne saw it and drove a punch through my defences that sent me flying back to hit the tunnel wall. Oh, that was good—the crack of the concrete almost did it for me, almost brought down the dark.

Then the flickering neon eclipsed, and I flashed back to the moment of the bouncer's intervention in the House. I was being forcibly reprieved from my insanity again—with style this time, I thought, forcing my vision to focus through sparkling fog. The puma had ploughed through to the Parfitts' end of the tunnel and was neatly taking them apart.

Shame hit me that I was leaving him to deal with it alone. As much use as tits on a bull as I was at that point, I had to help. I shoved myself upright against the horrible mural of a ship some joker untiringly dubbed *Titanic* in careful marker-pen letters after each one of its cleanups. Aaron, having dispatched Wayne with a high-power roundhouse, was swinging round to face Baz. Didn't look like much of a contest, but I knew these crew-cut little weasels of old. Wouldn't put it past Baz to pull a knife. Deciding not to give him a chance, I launched myself at his back. Weight and lack of balance were about all I could bring to the party, but Baz was off his guard, and we went down in a flail of arms and legs onto the tiles. I could smell him. Getting a second's advantage, I slammed him over onto his back and straddled his belly. Oh, I wanted to kill him. It was nothing to do with the cowardly four-on-one hunt through the city, or the fact that Wayne blamed me for Nicky's infidelity. I was just sick with rage. I saw Joe's beloved face gaping up at me from the underpass floor, and I drew my arm back and clouted the illusion as hard as I could round the jaw. I heard myself sob, in relief and the wild need to punch him again. Again, until Joe was pulp, until his beauty was only a memory like all my other memories…

Hands closed on my shoulders. “Matthew, stop.” I twitched and jerked round. The oil rigger was leaning over me. His eyes looked full of thunderclouds, and his mouth was bleeding at the corner. “He’s down. Leave it.”

“Oh, right,” I rasped. “If I was down, he’d bloody leave it, wouldn’t he?”

“No. He’d nick your wallet and kick you in the head before he left. Are you like him?”

I gave the question thought. It was easier to consider that than the feel of this strange man’s hands on me easing me up onto my feet. Steadying me, once I was there, with a grip on my upper arms so powerful and warm that the night and the neon and the cold pain in my head and heart seemed to fade and lose reality. “I dunno. I hope not.”

“Well, come on. His mates have run for it. Let’s go before they come back.”

Outside the tunnel, the air was dank, but a breeze moved through it that did not stink of urine. I took a deep breath, then shuddered and coughed as it caught in my lungs. To my surprise, Aaron went and picked up a nicely folded jacket from the rails that led up to the station—my own, which he’d apparently laid there before wading into my fight. “Here,” he said, holding it out to me. “Your wallet and keys should be there.”

Keys. Great. I wondered when I would have noticed those were missing. “Thanks,” I said awkwardly. “How did you know it was mine? How…how did you know to come after me?”

He looked at me. He was taller than I was, but only by about an inch. I wasn’t sure how he made the difference look like a foot. His eyes were hazel now—green plus orange streetlight, and filled with wry amusement. “You sit and watch for long enough, you see things.”

“Is that what you do? Sit and watch?”

“Sometimes. That was nice going, by the way, back there in the club.”

I felt a blush start. Christ, it was the painful schoolboy kind that crawls up out of your crotch and paints your face guilty scarlet. I hoped the weird light would

hide some of it. “You were happy enough to spectate,” I said harshly, trying to thrust some of my shame back out onto him.

He quirked a smile. His mouth and eyes were briefly touched by the shadows of half a dozen emotions, none of them readable to me, except I was pretty sure not one of them was shame. “Well,” he said. “Part of it was worth watching.” My mouth went dry. In spite of myself, a dull tingle of excitement began at the base of my spine. As if to reinforce it, he said, “Do you live far from here?”

“Er…no. No, just up the road.”

“Come on, then.”

The street was quiet, only a handful of late-night revellers making their way home. The last of the Metro trains were long gone, the railway line across the road hushed with that unique city silence, the pause between movements of industrial symphony. I’d been deaf to such music for far too long. Too busy keeping my head down, avoiding the memory of meeting up with Joe at the station—ridiculous for a sixty-second walk home, but that was what we’d always done. I noticed, too, the difference between walking alone at this time in the morning and walking in company. That no one looked, not even a second glance. I was plainly off the market. Taken…

We stopped outside the gate that led to my building. He stood on the pavement, looking up with his hands in his pockets. “Is that your flat? The one with the light on?” I followed his gaze and nodded. He said with an odd, rough gentleness, “It looks very nice.”

Did it? I blinked and tried to see my home through the eyes of a stranger. I supposed it did. From here, you could see the rich ivory walls, a couple of our paintings and the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The windows were clean. I had, over the last six months, continued to keep the place neat and pleasant. It was a kind of habit, I supposed. I’d never been domestic, but Joe liked things that way. I’d left a light on because Joe hated coming home to darkness. “Thanks,” I said and turned to Aaron. “Come in. For God’s sake, come in and…fuck my brains out.”

He put his hands on my shoulders again. Why the hell couldn’t I get a read on

his face? The mouth, the green eyes, so expressive, and yet it was as if he'd learned to code their language into their very beauty, like hieroglyphics or the jewelled breastplates of the Levite priests. "I've done a lot of stupid things in my time," he said quietly. "But I've managed never to screw someone as drunk, stoned and fucked-up as you."

I stared at him. I'd thought I was hiding the state of myself pretty well, but that was a fair assessment. "What—all that was just to walk me home?"

"Can you honestly tell me you're up for anything more?"

Absolutely. Come in and see. At the very least I can lie facedown and let you do me like that lad I picked up last week, whose name I can't remember, and I passed out in the middle of it, and when I woke up he was gone, so no harm, no foul, right? I lowered my gaze. Suddenly I was so tired I could hardly stand, and on a dangerous knife-edge of tears. He turned me between his hands. He swung open the gate and guided me step-by-step to my building's front door. He stood there behind me until I had dug out my key, and when the door opened, he carefully pushed me inside.

I collapsed on my backside on the stairs. Scrambling round, I began belatedly to thank him for coming to my rescue. But the hall was empty, the door closed as tight in its frame as if he had never been there.

Chapter Three

The next week was strange for me, mostly in that it was more normal, more like the weeks before Joe's departure than any I'd managed in some time. I'd missed two sets of rounds but did not miss the third one, which probably went a long way towards saving my career. I volunteered for long shifts, minimising the empty-flat syndrome which so often triggered my searches for company elsewhere. Lou caught up with me in the hospital canteen, apologising for having bailed on me, and instead of brushing him off and pretending I didn't remember, I apologised in turn for being so fucking unbearable. He was astonished and relieved, and we ended up having a more normal conversation than any we'd enjoyed for a while, both of us tacitly avoiding any mention of Joe.

I didn't know what the difference was. It wasn't so much that I'd bottomed out in the Powerhouse that Saturday: I knew from experience I could in fact dive a hell of a lot lower than that. Maybe it was knowing how close I'd come to being beaten raw, or worse, because I doubted the Parfitt lads on a rampage would have known when to stop. Maybe it was having had my degradation witnessed by Aaron. The more I tried not to think of him, the more he haunted my mind, and the more I didn't want ever again to make that kind of first impression on a man like him. Not that I'd get the chance. If there were other beautiful, sexy, kindly, courtly oil riggers running about on the streets of Newcastle, they were all avoiding me. God—not only had he rescued me, he'd made such a gentlemanly catch when I'd thrown myself at him…Well, maybe that was it. Maybe being thought worthy of respect even in such a condition was making me think twice about further self-harm.

At all events, I spent a lot of that week replaying moments from that night in my head. They stuck up like volcanic islands from the sea of my drunken amnesia, and while some were god-awful, making me suddenly groan and clutch my head in the quiet of the library, I could dwell for a long time on the others. His appearance among the shadows in the underpass. The way he'd held me on the street outside my flat, the way his hands had cupped my shoulders…Even, God help me, the searing instant when I'd locked my gaze to his and shuddered

to climax up against the wall in the House: his look then, and his wry admission of watching, had somehow partway redeemed me. Letting my mind go over these imperfect pleasures was a viable alternative to lying awake missing Joe, and that was such a relief that I went after the memories hard, turning them into fantasies where Nicky turned into Aaron, and Aaron did not display such nice manners in the doorway to my flat. For the first time in months, jerking off brought release and then sleep. When I did it thinking of Joe, all I could do afterwards was cry myself into a blinding insomniac headache.

The following Saturday night found me back at the Powerhouse. Of course I was looking for Aaron, but I kept that motive as carefully concealed from myself as from Lou. I didn't want to be scared off my own turf by the likes of the Parfitts, I told both of us. I'd given Lou part of the story of my night's escapade, but not all. Not the part where Aaron had come charging to my rescue like a knight in a scuffed but stylish leather jacket. Not his tender, gracious delivery of me to my front door. I wanted to keep those memories, not have them pawed over eagerly by Lou for signs of budding romance. I knew he wanted me to find someone, and I knew his motives were more than half guilt. And I didn't want to admit, even to myself, that I could begin to consider anyone but Joe in anything other than the most rawly sexual light. Oh, I'd tumble half the town to take my mind off things, but to wait all week, hoping against hope that a sensible man like Aaron would even take the risk of encountering me again…No, I didn't care if I didn't see him, and with that in mind, set off for a very moderate night on the town, surrounded by a group of mates, promising Lou I'd stay on however short a leash he chose to hold.

The Parfitts were there, as well as Nicky. Both brothers were still quite well bruised up, and I only smiled modestly when Lou whistled in admiration. Wayne settled for dirty looks and a stomach-churning snog—not that I could really complain about public displays of affection—with poor Nicky, who looked as if he hadn't been let out from under the bed in a week.

Aaron's place at the bar was occupied by a scared-looking middle-aged businessman. I told myself I didn't mind. That I certainly hadn't expected to find him there, or anywhere else in the club's booming shadows, and I wasn't looking around for him. I concentrated on the lost art of having a few drinks without getting arseholed and grabbing the first half-willing prick that came near me. I could do it. "Riverside" came on, and my mouth dried out a bit, but this was the

radio edit, its lyrics censored down to—well, just *riverside.* The world was a less interesting place than I'd given it credit for, that was all.

I told myself I could cope, and I did, pretty well, all that weekend and through a decent slice of the next week. I was almost back into a routine. My concentration wasn't good enough for the reading and studying that might get me through my foundation-year exams, but I didn't miss any more shifts. There was life after Joe. There had to be, hadn't there? I just wished that instead of my constantly having to muster every scrap of my strength in order to feel normal, it would happen of its own accord. I didn't want happy. Normal would have done. Still, on the whole I did a good job of faking it, until the doorbell rang at eight o'clock on Thursday, and Marnie was there on the doorstep.

The problem with Marnie was that you couldn't dislike her—not even when you'd been dumped for her. She was sweet, self-contained, very intelligent in a quiet way. She was also a nurse. That was how Joe had met her. Joe and Marnie, doctor and nurse, love's young dream. If she was aware of the stereotype, she bowed her head to it. To me, she'd never been anything other than courteous. Unapologetic, God knew, but why should she apologise? Winning Joe was no more her fault than losing him had been mine. On the few occasions when we'd met, we'd been scrupulously polite to each other, and this was the same. I asked her to sit down; made us both a cup of tea. She told me Joe was sorry not to have come round himself, but they'd both thought this might be better coming from her. Sitting back on the sofa, I wrapped my fingers firmly round the mug I'd found too hot to touch a second before, and I waited for it. News of a baby? That actually wouldn't have upset me. Joe loved kids, and knowing he was getting one might have lessened my sense of our breakup's utter futility and emptiness.

No. She'd had her shifts cut back. So had he. Times were tight for everyone, weren't they, and really I must be finding this big flat a lot to heat and manage. It might work out best for everyone if it went on the market.

I put the mug down. My fingers were scarlet from tip to palm. I told her, quite steadily, I thought, that not only had I scraped together the mortgage payments to keep the place for the last half year, but I'd never asked Joe for a penny to help out and never would. He didn't have to worry. Nor did she. And then Marnie, who beneath her quiet sweetness was incredibly determined, put her cards on the table and said Joe wanted his share in the value. And soon.

It shouldn’t have mattered. Bricks and mortar, right? Not Joe’s problem if I had dedicated the last few months to preserving some kind of mausoleum of our life together. Grocery cupboards still full of his favourite soups, wardrobes with the clothes he had left behind neatly hung up and ready for use. His toothbrush still in its holder beside mine. That one *was* pathetic actually. Watching Marnie, who was very sympathetically watching me, I made a mental note to bin the brush.

There was nothing I could do. Even if I’d wanted to put up a fight, the flat was jointly owned, and I couldn’t afford to buy Joe out. Marnie finished her tea. We talked about small things—the cold, how close it was to Christmas. Perhaps she thought about enquiring into my festive plans, but she was either too kind or didn’t have the nerve. As I saw her to the door, she said that if I would just let the odd viewer in, she would deal with the sale. I wouldn’t have anything to worry about.

Bricks and mortar. It shouldn’t have mattered, and yet, when she was gone, a kind of dull panic seized me. If Joe had been the heart of my life, this flat, these rooms, had been its bones, an enduring skeleton. Structure and shelter in the mess. Christ, it was like he’d died, and she’d come round and told me I couldn’t tend his grave.

That reflection did it. Self-disgust tore through me. I grabbed a coat and walked out. What was I going to do, sit around all night in the bones? The fucking graveyard? I shoved my hands in my pockets and headed off, up the beautiful street Joe and I had chosen to make home, way beyond the budget we’d discussed, but such a far cry from Shieldwell and the council wastelands that it had made both of us think we had made it. That we were safe. I went past the row of expensive little shops, keeping my eyes front and down. All right, maybe Marnie had a point, and I would be better off living somewhere I could look at the local baker’s without a hundred memories of weekend mornings, of taking turns to run out and get breakfast before leaping back into bed. Beyond the shops and the even nicer sweep of Georgian houses—not just tempting but prohibitive, and probably just as well—the Exhibition Park stretched out beneath its bleak, leafless trees. That was full of memories too, but I’d have to walk long miles around here to find a place that wasn’t. Striding blindly over the grass, I smiled bitterly. For a couple of nights recently I’d been the exhibition around here. I didn’t just do pubs and clubs. There were usually a couple of lads to be

found hanging round beneath the bridges or lounging around the steps of the bandstand.

Must be too cold for them. If they *had* been on duty, it wouldn't have made a difference—I was past even that grim comfort now, I told myself, hoping Marnie's cloud might have a lining of dignified misery. That would have been a nice change…I made it through the park intact and onto the long straight road that led past the university's medical school. Obviously even slowing down at that point would have been masochistic, and I kept walking, up past the digs we'd shared with Lou—roaring with music as I passed by, as if in loving memory of us—and the student pub on the corner. Beyond that was the edge of civilisation. Well, no—just a break in it. I loved a lot of things about the city, and not least of them was this vast green interruption. The *town moor,* as if a great wasteland of heath was and should be an integral part of human settlements. A breathing space, a pair of lungs. Common land protected by ancient common law. Cows grazed there. In summer, kids came to fly kites. Civilisation picked up again afterwards, roads and houses encroaching, but no builder or developer ever touched the moor. I loved it. Joe loved it. God, if I'd set out with the intent of finding the place that would hurt me most to look at again, I couldn't have done better. Picnics, early-morning shared runs, cautious, passionate sex in the sunny hollow we'd both calculated was just about screened from unwary kiddies and grandmas…

A different world on a winter night. A banshee wind was slicing down from the north. The only people out there looking for sex would be those whom society had freaked out and stonewalled into not being able to get it anywhere else. That wasn't me. I was beginning to calm down, the knifing gale knocking even the will to be properly miserable out of me. All right. Enough was enough—I would go home. It might not be mine any longer, but it contained things I should be grateful to have the use of on a night like this—warmth, food, a bed… I turned around. It was marginally shorter to retrace my steps than carry on down the Great North Road. Sensible choice. I think I knew at that moment what a blade-edge I was on; that I was going to start being sensible or jump the rails entirely, and there wasn't much in between.

A man was waiting behind me. He was about ten yards off, leaning on one of the trees that bounded the moor. Probably he had been concealed there when I went past: he had that look about him. And apparently I had my own look about

me. He saw that I saw him, and he didn't step back.

He was nothing like Aaron. About twenty years older, for a start, and dressed one shade off tramp. He was dark, that was all. Or I thought he was—everything was dark, and getting darker, as I left the path and followed him through a gap in the fence and onto the moor. He was big and bulky. Serving him—sucking him or letting him have me, whatever it turned out to be—would be a struggle. Maybe I would die of it this time. Choke or tear apart. It was so bloody strange, I reflected, stumbling into the bushes. In all my time with Joe, apart from our occasional three-ways, I'd never even thought about touching anyone else. And now I couldn't stop.

He turned and grabbed me by the shoulders. I took my next breath with my face rammed tight against the frost-rimed trunk of a tree. *Okay.* That answered my question about how this encounter might play out. The transactions were usually simple enough, God knew. Considering the stink of him now he was up close, I supposed I was lucky he hadn't opted for anything that would bring my mouth and nose too close to the business end. He started tearing at the front of my jeans, and I snarled at him and shoved his hands away, doing it for myself. Wanted to be able to walk away from this with a zip that still fastened, didn't I? His breath began to explode against my ear. He was already humping me, groaning. He dragged my pants down, and I felt the shove of his dick, clammy and cold…

I didn't want it. Way, way too late to be reaching that conclusion, but I still stupidly expected to be listened to when I said no. I said it several times, accompanying the last with a violent twist to be away, and he grabbed my hair, banged my brow off the tree trunk and told me, in a guttural rasp, that he had a knife.

I didn't believe it. I hung on to the trunk, waiting for my head to clear enough for me to try again. I wasn't even sure why my body and mind had clamped shut at this point: they'd gaped wide enough to smellier, bigger and less courteous punters than this one. All I could see, through pulsating red flowers, was Aaron's face. Aaron, according me the respect I hadn't earned. The kindness my whole soul craved…Probably I would never see him again, so my sudden conviction that I did not want to be touched by anyone else on the planet—Jesus, not even Joe—was inconvenient, to say the least. "No," I repeated, and a thin cold line

pressed into my jugular.

Not quite a rape. Maybe my struggles had excited him, or maybe hopeless premature ejaculation was one of his reasons for being out there in the first place. He pushed and pushed, while I stood with gritted teeth and tight-shut eyes, then shot his load between my buttocks, spattering across the small of my back. He made a whooshing sound, as if his last breath were leaving him along with his come, and I seized my moment: drove an elbow back into his gut and tore loose.

His knife was the edge of an empty tin, crushed and folded almost into two. It clattered to the ground as I shoved him away and stumbled out of his reach. I needn't have worried: his interest in me was as spent as his limp dick. I watched, trembling and gasping, while he shoved it back into his trousers, zipped up and lumbered unhurriedly off towards the road.

I ran. There wasn't any point, and I wondered, flying blindly across the orange-black moor, what was worse—being chased down by yobs or left to my escape with no one at either end to care if I made it. I just couldn't slow down. If I ran hard enough, the awful, sick sobbing noises I was making could just have been shortness of breath. This was quite a good shortcut, diagonally out through the dark. I reached the Great North Road in no time and plunged across six lanes of traffic unscathed. No brakes squealed, no horns blared. Maybe I had become invisible to drivers too, insubstantial enough that cars could pass through me. By the time I reached home, I had forgotten all about Marnie's plans for the property: it was just a door which I could slam shut behind me, a set of stairs I could pelt up, so well-known to me I didn't need to switch a light on. It was a source of hot water and soap, and I stood under the shower until even the big Victorian tank gave up and started to run cold around me. It was a bathroom cabinet which contained the last of the supply of sleeping pills I'd been prescribed back in June, about a fortnight after Joe had taken my hand, sat me down on the rug by the hearth and told me that, much as he loved me, this just wasn't what he wanted anymore.

Cloth hit my face. I put up a hand that did not feel like my own and made my fingers curl around the fabric. Okay. The next step was the eyelids. I levered

those open one at a time. Why had my body turned into a machine whose separate parts each required conscious operation? When had I lost the autopilot?

I pulled the clumsy hand back to look at what it held. A shirt…There was light in the room, but not daylight. I blinked and saw that there was also a man stamping impatiently back and forth between the bed and the wardrobe. I opened my mechanical mouth, got the tongue dryly working. “Lou…What the fuck?”

“What the fuck is right, you fucking divvy.” Something else hit me. Trousers this time. Oh, all right. I understood. A long time back, in very dark days, Joe had given Lou a key to the flat. I remembered that conversation actually; it had suddenly risen up from the fugues and blanks of that first week. Joe, on his way down the stairs for the last time with his last rucksack. Where had I been? Sitting on the top step, if I remembered rightly. Clutching the banister as a viable alternative to running after him, prostrating myself and clinging to his ankles. *“I’m giving Lou a key, Matt. Don’t do anything stupid. If he doesn’t see you around, I’ve told him to let himself in.”*

Plainly I had done something stupid. The alarm clock by the bed said half past nine. Professor McAllister’s lecture on disease control had been due to start on the hour. It was an important one: nonattendance would be frowned upon. It was very good of Lou to miss the first part to come and rescue me.

I didn’t think McAllister was gonna like these clothes. I sat up, making each vertebra do what it should, and had a look at them. My green silk shirt. Nothing flashy—more a moss colour—but it fit me skintight. My expensive black jeans. I was scheduled to A&E after the lecture. I cleared my throat of what felt like powdered-glass cobwebs. “Ta, Lou, but…I don’t want to get blood and puke on these.”

“Christ. Not another one of *those* nights…”

I frowned. My hair was in my eyes. It felt matted, as if I’d gone straight from the shower to bed without towelling it off or running a comb through. Night? Now I gave it consideration, at this hour even on a late-December morning there should have been some daylight beyond the drawn curtains. Lou was ferreting about beneath the bench where Joe and I kept our shoes. He emerged with a pair of my nice Italian Allegras. I never wore those to work either. For a moment, I thought he was going to chuck those at me too, but then he sighed and came

wearily round the foot of the bed to crouch beside me. “Matt,” he said, gesturing towards me with the shoes. “I know…I *know* all the shit you’ve been through. But you have *got* to stop making such heavy weather. I can’t keep up.”

That seemed fair enough. I didn’t recall ever asking him to try, but I knew he’d assumed the duty with good intentions. “Okay,” I said, taking the shoes, setting them in a businesslike pair on the floor. Ready for anything, once I’d found some underpants. “Sorry. I’m guessing you’re not here to wake me up for work.”

“Work? You’re fucking kidding me. If I had to come round here every time you missed a shift, I’d never be there myself…” He paused, brow furrowing in concern. “Matthew. It’s half nine at night, you dozy git. Friday night. My brother’s birthday if you recall him inviting you, same way he has every year since we were both about four years old. Get dressed.”

I sprang out of bed. My legs instantly buckled, but I made a good save, grabbing the bedside table before I could go down. My hand closed round a plastic pill bottle, and memory returned, one big flash. The good young intern I had once been knew you could down a hell of a lot of sleepers without killing yourself, and I had taken—well, a hell of a lot. I’d just wanted to sleep, hadn’t I? Not even that—just not to be sentient for a while. I’d sat on the edge of the bed, a half-full bottle of milk in my hand. That must have rolled out of sight somewhere, or Lou would have been on it, just as he would this near-empty pill vial if I hadn’t knocked it label-down behind the alarm clock. Milk. Right. Whatever I’d been doing, I’d wanted the dose to stay down. I’d taken the hell of a lot you could without killing yourself, and then I’d grabbed a handful more.

Fuck. I palmed the bottle, hauled myself upright and staggered into the bathroom before Lou could see the state of me. I leaned my palms on the sink and stared into the mirror without recognition.

Lou’s brother’s party wasn’t too hard to endure. Some things in life were constant, and one of these was that every year, James would invite the same group of people to the same small pizza restaurant off the Bigg Market. It was nice. Joe and I had always enjoyed it. James was rather the star of Lou’s family, being straight and in the possession of legitimate children. But their parents, if set in their ways, were good people. Growing up, I’d spent at least as much time

in their kitchen and back garden as I had my own. Joe—unforgiven even though he'd finally seen the heterosexual light—had not been invited, and Mam and Dad McNally kept bestowing compassionate looks upon me from over the table.

Ironically, this occasion was the first night when I could have handled Joe's presence. Marnie's too if James had wanted to extend the season of goodwill that far. I was numb from the skull-top down. When Lou, tiring of family bonhomie and tales of James's promotions—I could have told him one straight accountant son was worth ten gay doctors—suggested in a whisper that we make our escape, I followed him wordlessly.

To the Powerhouse, where because it was Friday night, not Saturday, I'd had no thought of seeing Aaron at the bar. But there he was, leaning casually, exchanging the odd word with the bartender. He looked less obviously fresh from the rigs than he had before, less…heavy-duty, I supposed, dazedly trying to define it as Lou towed me through the crowd. He was wearing a plain cotton shirt and looked probably as ordinary as he ever could. As if he'd dressed up—or down—for someone. I knew that had I been functional, the sight of him would have made me shudder with desire. As it was, I could barely stay on my feet, and I was almost glad the club was so packed he wouldn't have seen me even if he had happened to look up.

Chapter Four

To my surprise, Lou steered me off to the tables near the back, where a dividing wall shut off some of the bass from the dance floor. You could talk there, more or less, though conversation wasn't generally the object of Lou's Powerhouse visits: he liked to see and be seen. He asked me what I wanted to drink, and before I could reply, snagged a passing glass collector for a jug of margaritas. The first one was a bad idea. The second and third were worse, but number one had disguised them, and I thought I might have been experiencing some kind of return to life. Enough, anyway, to reply to Lou's small talk, which seemed nervous for some reason. Distracted. I nodded and smiled and probably kept my mask in place for a good five seconds after he fell silent, pressed his knee against mine beneath the table and reached for my hand. "Matthew. Matt, love…"

It was like being propositioned by your brother or some kindly old uncle who's been around your entire life and never so much as looked at you sideways. I stared at him, trying not to understand. There had been times when I'd even wondered if Lou was gay, or if it was just simpler for him to act it because he hung around so much with me and Joe. Just as I was persuading myself that sleepers plus tequila probably did add up to hallucination, he tightened his grip, leaned in and tried to kiss me.

I nearly went back over out of my chair. I didn't mean to shove him away—it was a reflex, and I made up for it as best I could an instant later by catching him, returning him gently to his seat. "Jesus Christ, Lou!"

"Ah, come on, Matt!" It was a raw shout, and the other lovers and hopefuls who'd come back there to try their luck began to glance around. "Why the fuck not?" he continued a little more quietly, glaring at me over the salt-lined rim of his glass. "We've practically lived together all our lives—you, me and Joe. And Joe's gone, in case you hadn't noticed. Not coming back, or he'd never have asked you to sell the sodding flat. What's the matter with me?"

My brain was working slowly. I'd been asleep for twenty-four hours or so, and anything could have happened in that time. Maybe I'd walked in my sleep, had some kind of conversation with Lou that would mean he now knew my latest

property news. I saw that he was slowly catching up with himself, realising what he'd said. He put his head in his hands. "*Shit,*" he said, muffled through his fingers. "Look, Marnie came round to see me yesterday. She said she'd told you, and…she wasn't sure you'd taken it in. She wanted me to keep an eye on you, make sure you kept the place decent for viewers. Let the agent in. That's all."

Weird. I'd thought I'd hit bottom a fortnight ago when I'd dirty-danced to orgasm with Nicky in the middle of this club. Again last night on the moor. But this was its own new kind of low. "Lou," I said, hardly knowing my own voice. I'd done plenty of yelling in my time but not had many occasions for cold anger. "I'd appreciate it if…from now on you, Joe and Marnie stayed the fuck out of my private life. And…what made you think that if Joe was out, you were in?"

"Why not? You've shagged everything else with a Y chromosome since he left, haven't you?"

My gut tightened. Despite the quelling remains of the temazepam, a hot stone lodged in my throat. "Christ. Is that what you want, Lou? A shag?"

"No! Well—yeah, but…more than that. I want to look after you. Live with you, now you've got to leave the flat. We'll get somewhere together." That sounded reasonable enough. Up until five minutes ago, I might even have agreed. But my continuing openmouthed silence scratched his surface once more, and his face twisted. "Listen, Matt. You're practically a drunk. I heard your supervisor telling Dr. Andrews this morning she was thinking of letting you go. I've seen all your crap, and I'd still…I'd still have you. Who else will? Nicky fucking Harris?"

I sat staring into the filmy disc of my last margarita—the one Lou had bought and poured for me. Lou was very generous. I returned the favour as often as I could, but seven times out of ten it was Lou who got the round. Made sure I was topped off.

I didn't have to drink them, though, did I? I knotted my fingers together. I heard myself say, quiet and polite as if we had been strangers, "Okay. I'm gonna go now, all right? You stay here."

"Oh Christ. *You* stay, you fucking loser. You'll be lucky if you can still walk."

Was he gone? I supposed so. The lights from the dance floor were no longer beating out his shadow on the table. Just at the moment, I did not want to lift my head and look.

I did not want to lift my head. The stone in my throat had become a boulder, a scald. I thought about what Lou had said. Rationally, I knew he'd been sitting on something—jealousy, resentment, whatever—and for whatever reasons, it had all just come clawing out. I was astonished—Lou, for God's sake!—but I shouldn't give his outburst too much mind.

But I had started thinking about Joe. I'd never been that much to write home about, had I? I'd thought so once—not in any particularly arrogant way, just aware that I was reasonably intelligent, decent looking, capable of loving. Oh yeah, certainly capable of that. And I'd always assumed Joe's defection had been just for the reasons he'd given me. He wanted a girl, and no matter how lovely a bloke I might be, I couldn't answer that. Now I began to wonder. *"You fucking loser…"* I hadn't been a loser or a drunk back then, but maybe I was lacking things other than tits and a womb that Joe couldn't live without. Maybe I'd been bristling with things he couldn't live *with*, and he'd never been able to tell me.

I jerked up one hand to my mouth, pressed my palm tight. For a second I thought I was going to be sick. Then my vision blurred, and I knew it was worse. *God no,* I prayed silently to whatever deity might look after feckless drunks in nightclubs. I couldn't cry here…

The air changed. I squeezed my eyes shut tightly, and all I could see was a retinal jump, red to black, as the pulsating lights swept the room. I didn't really care, but little hairs all down one side of my neck gave a prickle and lifted; olfactory cells fired. Sunlight. No, because that had no smell, but something I associated with sun, as if someone had picked up the Powerhouse from its city-dregs location, dropped it on sand dunes and lifted its roof. Salt. Warm grass. A breath of life from a different bloody world. And weirdest of all, I recognised it. Last time Aaron had stood close to me, I'd been too busy hitting on him to notice the way he smelled…

It must have registered, though. I opened my eyes, and he was there, holding out a hand to me. In the shifting lights, the air which still managed to be smoky, despite the ban, he looked utterly solid and real. His eyes were unfathomable as

ever, but their expression was somehow so kind it loosened my joints. He said, smiling faintly, “Do you want to dance?”

Of course I didn’t bloody want to dance. If he wanted to talk to me, he could take the seat Lou had just vacated. I looked at his hand. Its palm was broad, the fingers long, eloquent of power. I could see them manipulating steel, vast machineries, hauling up oil from its ancient hiding places under the North Sea. I could see him drawing me to my feet against my will if I put out my hand in return to touch him. I did. I hadn’t realised I was cold. When his grip closed round mine, its warmth seemed to shoot up my arm and into my chest. He exerted a gentle tug. “I’d have come over sooner,” he said, “but you gave me a good demo the other night of what happens around here to men who move on other blokes’ boyfriends.”

“Lou’s not my boyfriend,” I said unsteadily. I didn’t want to move. I wanted to hide in this corner until this latest humiliation—public tears, worse to me than public sex—was over. The tugging sensation increased, and I got up, only half voluntarily. He looked into my face. “Come on,” he said softly. “It’ll be better. Come on.”

I didn’t believe him, but the sheer technicalities of making my doped body walk with him onto the dance floor distracted me, restored to me some kind of control. I tried to recognise the track. Not “Riverside,” thank Christ—something older, from about six years ago. “Pray” by Syntax. Rippling, insistent bass line under a bone-melting vocal. The floor was heaving. I couldn’t imagine Aaron leaping about with this bunch of kids, and for me, it would be a physical impossibility. I tried to break away from him.

He put an arm around my waist and, without the least effort or hint of force, reeled me in. I didn’t even know what was happening until I was pressed close against him, breathing that sun-and-earth scent. There was no leaping involved. He moved with an unhurried power, picking up the strong first beat in the bar, drawing me in with him, instant sweet synch. His hand went to the small of my back. I clutched at him reflexively, first just in order to stay on my feet, and then because I never wanted to let go.

We were the last men standing that night in the House. Midnight came and went, then small hours, and the club emptied out of all but its hard core. The

dance floor population thinned down. I saw them go, saw space appear between the grappling, gyrating couples and groups. I watched, held fast, from over Aaron's shoulder. Time became strange for me. He slid his hands slowly down my back, leaving trails of warmth behind them. He found his target on my arse, his grip large and competent, and when I returned the embrace in kind—hesitantly, because something about him made me shy, even after my recent performances—he smiled against my ear. *Ah yes.* A whisper through the bass, hot, racking me with shudders. *Yes.* He pushed his hips against me, and time was strange. I thought I could soar straight to silent climax there and then if he held me like that, and I could feel that he was hard and ready too. But whether the cocktail of drugs and tequila inside me was holding me back, or his guiding rhythm was deliberately slowing me down, the arousal prolonged itself, stretched out like pouring honey. I gave up my grasp on his backside and put my arms round his neck. He rocked me, and time stretched. I closed my eyes.

The last men standing. The music had stopped, harsh overhead neons flickering up to kill the strobes and whirling colours. We were alone. I jerked my head up. We were still moving—only just; the shadow of a dance. I'd slept on my feet in his embrace. I felt myself blush to the hairline. "Oh God. I'm sorry. I…I think I had too much to drink."

"It's all right." He didn't let go of me. His eyes were hazel again—a little tired in the neon, full of amusement and an affection I couldn't remember deserving. "Did you ever think about stopping?"

I stared at him. I'd thought about cutting back of course. Staying off spirits, not drinking alone, keeping it for weekends or every other night. Weaning myself off nice and slow, because I could sure as fuck see that I needed to. I'd make a schedule of withdrawal in my head and lose myself in its complexities. "What? Just…stopping?"

"Yes. From now. Just stopping."

"I dunno. I…" Glasses were rattling on the tables around us as the collectors went to work. The overheads flickered on and off. Somewhere off in the distance, I heard a vacuum cleaner start to whine. "Don't know if I could."

"Okay," he said, as if this and any other spineless piece of ambivalence I cared

to expose were all fine with him. Nothing to worry about. “You fairly sober now?”

I gave it thought. I should have been. I’d slept most of it off on his beautiful shoulder. I ran a surreptitious check for marks of drool. “I think so. Fairly.”

“Good. I want to take you home, and I have to know yes means yes.”

“Oh.” Breath left my lungs. I shivered. I should at least appear a little bit harder to get, shouldn’t I? But I didn’t have the strength. Not to say no to the sunlight. “Okay,” I said. “Yes. I mean yes.”

We sat in the back of the taxi like strangers. This was the awkward part. I’d bailed at traffic lights before now, unable to face the complexities of extricating myself politely from my latest social entanglement. I was tired, and I hadn’t lied back at the club—I was sobering up. I hadn’t done this before. Never gone home with someone in clearheaded knowledge of what I was doing. Some blokes wanted to neck like randy teenagers on the backseat, as if showing off their conquest for the (usually disgusted) cabbie. I was relieved Aaron seemed happy to keep to his own side. His profile, caressed by oncoming headlights, was calm. Distant somehow. Lost in thought.

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. It made a tiny sound. Aaron looked up. He didn’t shift from his seat, but he put a hand across it and took mine.

The cab pulled up outside a big, featureless block on the Quayside. Its frontage looked out over the water. Having offered to pay for the cab and been courteously refused, I stood on the kerb, trying to take in the sheer cliff of brick and glass—felt my elbow warmly clasped as the night shifted round me, tipping on its axis.

“Come on inside. Before you fall down.”

His flat was on the sixth or seventh floor. I lost count as the digits in the lift flickered by. I’d run out of small talk, and now my energy was going too. Standing so near to him in a confined space was making my head spin. He filled me with a need I was afraid I’d soon be too weak to assuage. I’d been living for the last day or so on artificial toxins and air, and thinking about my life at the

moment gave me a vision of circling, snapping wolves. God, I should have grabbed that abandoned half bottle of wine I'd seen on my way out of the club: with that inside me, I could have been entwined around him, not standing mute, staring at the industrial carpet…Finally the doors hissed wide, and he pressed a hand between my shoulders, as if I needed guidance.

There was a corridor. The place looked like a hotel. Aaron said, "I work on an oil rig. It's normally four weeks on, two off, though I'm back and forth a bit more than that just now…This is where they put us up on our off duty." He pulled out a bunch of keys from his pocket, and after drawing me to a halt outside one of the anonymous doors, unlocked it. Pushed it open. This was all fine. Routine, although he was certainly politer than most, gesturing me ahead into the hallway. I smiled at him. Made my casual walk inside, glancing about me with polite interest, except all I could see were flickering sparks. My shoulder hit a door frame, and I crashed to my knees on the carpet.

"Matthew. Matthew, what is it?"

He was kneeling in front of me. If I blinked, I could clear enough static to get a fix on his concerned gaze. Not just concerned—almost frightened. "Sorry," I said, trying for a laugh which died in my throat. "Maybe not as sober as advertised. I…tripped on something."

"No, you didn't. You're not well, are you?"

I clutched his arms. The tighter I did so—and he didn't seem to mind; just increased the pressure on my shoulders in response—the less the building swayed around me. "Okay," I said, the truth on my lips before I had time to censor or pull up. "I…think I tried to kill myself last night." It sounded absurd. I couldn't take it seriously. "It's all right. Nobody noticed."

"*Matthew.*" How did he know my name? Casting back, I recalled he'd used it that first night at the bar, then found myself lost in how much I liked to hear him say it. My mind was backpedalling from its confession. A stupid mistake, a blip. A secret I'd thought to take to my grave. He'd think I was a nutcase at best. At worst, a hysterical drama queen he was about to escort back to the lift and press the Down button. "Matthew," he repeated fervently, and put out a gentle hand to my face. He brushed his thumb across my lips. "Thank God it didn't work.

Thank God.”

He sat with me on the edge of his bed. The room was very plain, just a square lit by apricot neon from outside. He had his arm round my waist, exerting no pressure, just keeping me close. He watched as I finished off the glass of water he’d poured me, then reached for the bottle on the bedside table and poured me another. “What was it?” he said. “Pills?”

I hadn’t thought I was thirsty, but the fresh tang of untainted liquid had clenched my throat with desire, and I’d drunk till my lungs cramped. “Mm. Just sleepers. Was out for a whole day straight. Don’t know why the fuck I’m so tired now.”

“Chemical sleep’s different to natural.”

“I know. I…I’m a doctor.” This revelation, given the state of me, struck both of us as funny, and I was relieved to hear his laugh. “Or I will be if I don’t screw up my foundation year. Aaron, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tell you.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Impulse. Stupidity. It’s all gone now. I’m fine, really.”

He shifted and ran a hand across my hair. “Yeah. You look it. Kick your shoes off and lie down.”

I frowned. “You didn’t bring me back here to tuck me up. You saw me with Nicky the other night. You know what I do.”

“I saw what you did then. I assume it’s not a nightly performance…”

“Well, I’m not, like…*in rep,* but—that was tame, believe me, compared with…” I shut up. His hand was on my shoulder, then my chest. In any other circumstances, being gently forced down onto the bed by him would have overwhelmed me with desire. As it was, all I could feel was the shattering relief of being horizontal, of not having to fight anymore. I tried to bat his hands away when he reached to ease off my shoes. Then my head hit the pillow. I stayed with the moment long enough to feel the brush of his hand across my hair, once

and then again. I struggled briefly. It wasn’t safe to pass out cold in a stranger’s house…The caress came again, and I surrendered.

Chapter Five

Light from the water. I lay for a long time watching the dance, not in any hurry to fit it or myself into my waking world. There didn't seem to be any urgency. It was Saturday. I knew that much.

The room was strange to me. Normally that would have triggered alarms. No matter what depravities I'd initiated the night before, I got myself fast out of morning-after bedrooms. One guy, who had still thought himself straight when he picked me up at the Dog, had beaten me raw when my continued presence in his bed gave evidence to the contrary. Even lacking aggression, breakfast scenes were seldom nice. Daylight faces, awkward silences. Even the sound of another man's respiration in the bed next to me made me nervous…

But this sound, like the dancing water-light, was different. It kept me in a halfway world, drifting. I didn't have many good memories from home, but we'd had a rainwater barrel, hadn't we, under the pipe beneath my bedroom window. And one of the street's few trees had shifted in the summer wind…

Light from the river. Aaron breathing softly beside me. I surfaced, voluntarily for once, smiling. I sent one hand on an exploratory mission to the buttons of my shirt, my belt and my zip. All neatly fastened. Further, no sourness in my throat from a stranger's come—no ache in my jaw or my backside from letting myself be used when too drunk to have a proper pain threshold. Untouched.

Nevertheless, there he was. I rolled cautiously onto my side and propped myself onto one elbow to look at him. He had shared the bed in the most gentlemanly manner possible: was fully dressed, lying on his side on top of the blanket he had carefully arranged over me. I took him in, measuring with unconscious pleasure the proportion of width between his shoulders and his hips, that nice indicator of male strength. The plane and the curve that connected them. I put out a hand. I wanted to lay it on the dip beneath his rib cage, on the place where his shirt was coming a little untucked from his jeans. But he shifted and stirred in his sleep, rubbing his brow against the pillow. The light in the room—it must come from the river, I thought, connecting the pieces of the last fractured night in my mind—picked out the silver glimmer in his hair, cast

shadows through his long black lashes. He looked serious, though the corner of his mouth I could see was tucked up in a smile. He looked bloody tired. It occurred to me, belatedly, that he might just have finished a shift on the rig, and I hadn't been the most restful of companions the night before.

I didn't want to disturb him. I withdrew my hand and eased carefully out of the bed. Moving made me realise how badly I needed to pee, and I went in search of the bathroom. There was something very different about this morning, aside from my undisturbed clothes. My head was free from the sledgehammer ache that occupied it more often than not these days when I woke up. My mouth wasn't dry, and I wasn't desperately trying to navigate strange rooms in the dark before I threw up. It frightened me that freedom from hangover struck me as a novelty. What had Aaron said while he rocked me on the dance floor last night —*"Why don't you just stop?"*

I stripped and stood under the shower and tried to give it thought. It seemed easy enough at the crack of dawn, of course, when the last thing I wanted—so far, anyway—was a hair of the dog. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent a whole evening sober, though. How had that happened? It was something I used to throw at my dad. *"You can't even get through one night without."* I knew it was very genetic.

I got out and dried off, looking at my clothes. They weren't too bad, for having been slept in after a Powerhouse night. I'd made the walk of shame through the city's morning streets in worse. Maybe that was what I should do—clear out, let Aaron have his sleep and find somebody else tonight, somebody functional… But I didn't want to go. Giving my reflection a critical once-over, I wondered if I could redeem myself. I felt not just better this morning, but clearer, as if I had met a few demons in the depths of my drugged sleep the other night and given them notice to quit. Aaron's dressing gown was on the back of the door. I put it on, picked up my clothes and made sure I'd left the place tidy.

He was still sleeping when I looked through the open bedroom door. For once, shyness touched me. Normally I leapt on my prey…But there was a dignity to him, lying there unshielded, that made me think of an off-duty Greek warrior catching up on his kip between battles, and I turned away.

Not much space for wandering, and not much to see apart from a spectacular

view across the Tyne. His flat was two bleak rooms, generically furnished; the kitchen no more than a sink, cooker and fridge behind a divider in the living room. No pictures, no real signs of individual human life, and yet he must spend a lot of time here on his fortnights off duty…There was one large bookshelf, and I padded over to have a look. It had been a long time since I'd been interested enough in a man to care about much above waist level or had the chance to look. Running my fingertips along spines, I emitted a low whistle. There were a few novels—heavy-duty American authors, Mailer and Updike, and endearingly, a well-worn set of Austen—but the rest of the shelf space was occupied by engineering texts so serious even their titles went straight over my head. *Dynamics of Geothermal and Biomass Alternative Energy Applications. Engineering H2CNG Infrastructure Solutions.* I shook my head. *Nice work, Matthew. Not just a beautiful oil rigger, but a smart one.* It only increased the mystery of what he was doing with me.

I heard the mattress creak and padded back to the bedroom door. Aaron had turned on his back. He did not look so serene anymore—shadows of disturbance were chasing like clouds across his face. A morning erection was straining the front of his jeans, but it didn't seem as if the experience of waking up hard was a pleasant one for him. As I watched, he put a hand to himself, not in a caress, but a kind of warding-off gesture, as if he were trying to push it away. He took a deep breath and said, very clearly, "Rosie. Ah, Rosie…"

Oh, okay. That cleared things up. This was the flat where he came to work—to get away, probably, from the missus and kids and discharge inconvenient sexual needs with boys from the Powerhouse. Somewhere off in the streets of Newcastle was a semidetached with a garden where he really lived. I took hold of the rising pain in my throat and imagined strangling it at birth; I envisaged it as a bud and nipped it hard. When had he said otherwise? And what bloody business was it of mine? We'd just met. I hadn't even fucked him. If somewhere in my head a voice was saying, *great—another part-time closet straight hedging his bets with the other side,* I didn't have to listen. He was beautiful, and he had been kind to me. It was just one night. Well, one morning. Or not even that, if he was due home for breakfast with Rosie. I'd better get started.

I knelt on the bed beside him. I rested a hand on top of the one that was still restlessly planing his cock, and he woke up, green eyes dawning surprised, as if he'd been very far away. As I moved his hand away and unzipped him, his half-

erect shaft filled and stiffened, came up hard beneath his boxers. “God,” he said. “I’m sorry. Like some sex-starved teenager.”

I looked at him. A flush had risen beneath his pale skin, and that and the blackness of his five-o’clock shadow and his ruffled hair completed his beauty for me. There was nothing teenage about it. The cock was all grown up as well, a long, thick weight in my hand. If this was my one chance with him, I was going to make the most of it. “Don’t be sorry for this,” I whispered and leaned over him. “As for starved…I can’t imagine you having to go without for very long.”

“Oh, you’d be fucking astonished.”

Ah. Rosie not putting out, then. Hating myself for the morbid, bitter thoughts —had I always been like this; had Joe’s departure only given the final twist to a nature already soured?—I took him into my mouth.

From the corner of my eye, I saw his head go back. I held him, steadying the plunge of his hips. He was pretty hungry. Maybe it had been a while. His tip hit the back of my throat, and I gagged, my angle not quite right. In recent encounters, I hadn’t minded being choked a bit—or even a lot, on nights when oxygen deprivation had seemed preferable to thought. But he made a sound of dismay and sat up, six-pack tightening deliciously, and shoved my shoulders back. “Don’t, Matthew. You’d better let me go.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want a blow job. I think if you try at the moment, I’m going to…do you a mischief. I want more, but…”

I sat up, surveying him. I wondered why he thought *more* would be a problem for me. I drew my fingertips lightly up his shaft, imagining how it would feel inside, and my own cock leapt. I shifted, showing him. Gave a little shrug. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“Oh God. Bedside drawer.”

He tried to keep me on top for a while, as if scared of losing control. I straddled him, letting his sheathed dick slide up into me. And up and up, until I was shuddering, working my cock and trying every trick of relaxation in the

book not to tighten up and reject him. I heard my gut-punched moans with surprise. Joe said I was too quiet during sex. Not much chance of that now. It felt like my vocal cords were being squeezed as hard as I was crushing down on this impalement. Then Aaron began to move, and it was hopeless. I hung on through the first few thrusts, throwing a hand back to clutch at his thigh. “Hoi,” I whispered. “You. Gorgeous. Stop.” He did on the instant and lay looking up at me with shock-dilated eyes. “Won’t it be easier for you to screw my brains out if you lay me down?”

His lips parted. A few rasping breaths came and went, and he got out, painfully, “Probably.”

“It’s what you need, isn’t it? Come on.”

Not an elegant dismount. By then I’d caught his sense of urgency, and I didn’t care if he was on a weekend gay break or not. He took me by the armpits as I scrambled off and steadied me from falling out of the bed. Then he stretched me out on my front. I grabbed the edge of the mattress as he entered me again. It was tough even with the extra lube I could feel on him. He’d let me set the pace the first time. Now I knew what that restraint had cost him. He was built to go in hard and deep, and I buried my face in the pillow to muffle a yell that would have woken half the floor. When my lungs were empty, I hauled in a sobbing breath and shouted again. It was welcome, protest at the size of him, wild excitement—a sudden grief that, of all the men I’d let inside my body, for the first time I *wanted* one, wanted to be filled and fucked by someone other than Joe. I spread my thighs to try and tell him. I flailed out one hand blindly, and he caught it. He gasped my name against my ear, covered me with the heat of his body and started to thrust.

I came almost straightaway, without warning. I was out of control, and the spasm almost tore my heart out. More like stepping on a land mine than an orgasm, a detonation. I howled in anguished pleasure and writhed under him, feeling how he timed his strokes to my body’s contractions, wringing me out. But he wasn’t done yet—God, I knew that he had barely got started—and when he hesitated, I growled, “Don’t stop. Jesus, don’t stop, don’t stop.”

He lifted me onto my knees. I could brace against the headboard that way, give him some resistance, some friction. I was almost glad I’d shot so hopelessly

soon: could concentrate on him now, on the beautiful feel of being expertly fucked. If he was a part-timer, he was good—oh God, good—ploughing so deep inside me with every stroke that I could think of nothing else, pulling back just the right distance to give impact to the next. Angling to squeeze my prostate, although surely that horse was gone…

"Matthew, I can't." The words were a rasp between inhalations. I clutched the headboard, managed to glance back at him. He hadn't broken rhythm, but his beautiful face was set, almost grim. "I haven't…"

I tried to finish the sentence in my head. Hard, with every thought now directed to the renewing swell of my own arousal. *Done this before* would have been bloody unbelievable. "It's okay!" I choked out, pushing back to meet him thrust for thrust.

"It isn't. I can't come."

"Oh…" For a second, the fantasy flashed up of how it would be to get fucked to death by this man. He would never stop, and I would keep rising to climax around him till my heart burst. As I was doing now, incredibly, a tight little seizure beginning high up in my bowels, slicking my palms with sweat, making me groan and shudder. "Jesus, Aaron. You're gonna bring me over again." I felt more than heard his faint sound of disbelief, and I grabbed his hand and pulled it round to seize my rigid shaft. "There. Feel. Oh God, feel me come—make me…"

The wave hit again. I convulsed, my head snapping back, and lost my grip on the headboard. He ploughed me down onto the mattress, his hand still wrapped round my cock, and there, trapped between his thrusting and his grip, I wrenched to a second, incandescent orgasm, heaving like a speared fish in his embrace. He groaned against my ear as if something inside him was breaking, and I felt, beginning to slide down off the peak, the moment when his rhythm broke and the thrashing strokes began that would get him past his problem: ah yes, there, *there*; the flash and sudden heat as he burst into me, gasping my name.

When I woke, I thought he was Joe, and the stab of pain that usually came with such a mistake dissolved in the surprise of being warmly held. Not big on aftermath intimacies, Joe. I'd thought I didn't mind. I hadn't been with anyone

else—I'd thought that was how it was. I told Aaron softly to take off his clothes, watched while he did, then gathered him back into bed with me. His naked warmth stretched out against me, and I slowly let his movements, our gentle roll and caress, become his resurrection. I countered his grunt of incredulity with a whispered assurance that if I could hit a double, he certainly could, and I took hold of his lifting cock. Ducked my head beneath the blanket so I could see, in the wintry light off the river, how he looked when he hit peak and, grabbing wildly at my shoulders, started to cascade…

Chapter Six

It was two in the afternoon before either of us stirred again. This time my waking thoughts were free of Joe, even of Rosie—of anyone but Aaron, draped over my stomach, sound asleep where he'd dropped after our last round. His weight was solid, made breathing a sweet struggle to me, and I inhaled luxuriantly, running a hand down his spine. He moaned, stretching, and I waited in smiling apprehension—not to say disbelief—for him to feel that, despite our last exchanges, I could have gone again…"God, Matthew," he muttered, pushing up and looking at me, jade eyes still half lost in sleep. "I'm flattered, but…"

A snort of laughter shook me. "I know. Don't know what's wrong with me. Or…or so beautifully bloody right with you."

His expression changed. I tensed a bit. It wasn't something you said to a one-off lay, was it? But then he smiled, and I realised the one thing we hadn't done in all that grappling and fucking was kiss, and he leaned in towards me and rectified that, so tenderly and thoroughly I didn't know what to do with myself. My eyes closed on hot tears. My hands clasped helplessly on empty air, and I brought them down unsteadily to cup the back of his skull. I opened my mouth, shuddered as his tongue slipped inside, but somehow even that was less erotic than benediction, and a moment later he lifted up and said, "You'll starve if I don't give you some breakfast."

I thought about it. I found I was seeing the inside of my empty flat, and for the first time without lonely pain. I said, "Do…do you have the whole day?"

"Er…yes." He sounded surprised to be asked. "Ten or so, actually, if you're… not otherwise engaged."

I grinned and let it slide. He was kidding or overly optimistic. Rosie was never gonna wear that. "Well, I've got six cupboards full of groceries at home. A proper table and everything, and I'm not a bad cook if you fancy making it lunch."

He loaned me some clean clothes—after a second shower, the shirt and jeans

I'd shed the night before smelled rough—and made me sit down with toast and tea while he got ready. On the sofa, curled up with one of the Mailers, I wondered why he hadn't let us share the shower. Well, maybe some things were too intimate even after a night like that. A pity, I thought, feeling a shift and a heat inside my borrowed jeans, smiling at the ridiculous effect even thoughts of him could have on me. It would have been fun…

Of course, if I wanted to know more about where he drew the lines and why, all I had to do was go and pick up his mobile, which was within arm's reach on the table beside me. It had beeped and buzzed a couple of times since I had sat down. Unwillingly, I saw her: Rosie, in her sunny kitchen, frowning anxiously while she composed her texts. She wasn't anyone I could hate, or even dislike, any more than Marnie had been. She was dark haired and pretty. I even felt sorry for her, sending cautious messages to her man, who should have been home hours ago, trying to track him down without annoying him…I wouldn't do something as unsubtle as opening up the fresh texts, but the old ones would tell me enough. Useful information gained for free. Ultimately making life so much fucking simpler…

I shook myself, retracted my hand and took a good grip on the thick half of *Oswald's Tale*. Freely gained? Jesus, how was betraying Aaron's hospitality and trust not going to exact its price? Even if I got away with it, I'd know what I'd done. I'd never touched Joe's phone or e-mails in all the time he had been building his new life elsewhere.

That had hardly been fair trial of my virtue, though. I'd never had reason to look. On reflection, Joe's poise was incredible. Two years and never a flicker of difference in his behaviour towards me. I'd bought his lies wholesale—his poorly mam, down in Yorkshire, where his family now lived, keeping him away a couple of nights a week. His weariness when he got home. Poor Joe. I knew how much he loved his mam. I'd sat up waiting and folded him into my arms when he returned.

Acid burned up in my throat, Aaron's good toast threatening a return. Fuck. I never thought about this stuff. Joe's betrayal had been subtle and complete. No point in an autopsy, picking over all the points at which my life had slowly died. There were probably hundreds of them, hundreds of explanations, revelations, things I'd thought odd but dismissed. I could drive myself crazy with just one or

two. Already I'd spilled my tea, jolting halfway off the sofa as if something had stung me, and given serious thought to doing something I knew to be utterly reprehensible…

Aaron appeared in the doorway, towelling his hair. He was naked, and the sight of him full length in daylight made me lose a breath. "Are you all right?" he said. "You look like a ghost."

I felt like one, I wanted to tell him. My life had died, and since then I had haunted its old scenes and routines, bloodless and unreal. "I'm okay," I said, trying for a wide, deflecting smile. "I'm sorry. I spilled a bit of tea on your carpet…"

"Doesn't matter. It matches the wreckage you made of my bed." He came across and crouched beside me, the towel held unselfconsciously, concealing nothing. "Matthew, I should have asked you this last night. The pills you took—could they have done you any long-term damage? Have you seen a doctor?"

I am a doctor. I closed my mouth on that. It was facile and lame, and he didn't deserve it. His gaze on me was warm. I remembered him last night, thanking God for sparing the life of the drunken stranger that was all I could have been to him then. He had treated me as if I meant much more than that, given his affection as if I didn't have to earn it. As if it were just there. "No," I said. "They were just temazepam. I'm not even sure I was trying to off myself, to be honest." I glanced at his mouth. It was beautiful when he was listening, the lips slightly parted. I kissed him, lightly but with a shudder of fervour across my spine, as if I had wings that were trying to unfurl. "I'm okay, I promise. Thank you."

He wandered around the living room in my flat. I'd told him to relax and have a look around. Unlike his, the room was rich with evidence of previous lives, and I leaned in the doorway, drying my hands on a tea towel, watching him. I'd put a quick casserole on, turning down his offer to help. I felt strange. Part of it was sobriety. On the rare occasions when I bothered to cook these days, I did so with a wineglass in one hand, though it might as well have been the bottle for all that was left when I finished. I'd offered him a drink when we arrived, frightened at how badly I had begun to want one. He'd asked for fruit juice, and I'd told him that just because I wasn't didn't mean he couldn't—astonishing myself, because

I couldn’t recall deciding that *I wasn’t* at all—and he hadn’t made a fuss; just acknowledged this weird new development with a nod and observed that solidarity could help.

He paused by the photograph of me and Joe on Tynemouth Sands, one of my favourites. He’d bought me a surf class for my birthday, and we’d spent an hour crashing off the rented boards into the perishing cold North Sea. We were bruised and bleeding from sand grazes and blazing with happiness. He had his arms round me, his fingers in my hair. It was taken about eighteen months ago, something else I hadn’t thought about. Marnie had just moved to Newcastle to be closer to her job. Joe’s mam had just fallen ill. His presents had been of their usual thoughtfulness and generosity.

I didn’t understand. I went to sit down on the edge of the sofa, nursing my own glass of fucking useless fruit juice, which I now strongly wished to dump into a quart of vodka. Aaron smiled at the photo. People often did. That much joy was infectious. He moved on, now looking at the small framed shot on the bookshelf, glancing to me for a permission I could only give by a nod. He picked it up and turned it to the light, matching faces. Joe and me again, this time on the football field. He had me in a friendly neck-lock. We must have been about ten. After a moment, Aaron looked at me, frowning. He said, “Either this is your brother, or…”

“No. That’s Joe, my ex. We were together for…” I tailed off. We’d hardly been precocious. Hadn’t had sex until we worked out what sex was, well into our midteens, but that had been a technicality. “He lived up the road from me. I can’t remember when we weren’t.”

“Until…?”

“Six months ago. June.”

He set the picture carefully back on the shelf and turned to me in silence. Oh God. That look would finish me. There wasn’t a trace of pity in it. It was searing compassion: hot, wordless, man-to-man. “It’s all right,” I tried, aware that though my voice was steady, huge tears were hitting the knees of my jeans, a flood I hadn’t given permission to start and was completely powerless to stop. “I’ve been filling my time in—you know, drinking, fucking around…”

“Swallowing handfuls of pills. Okay.” He came and sat next to me. He put his arm around me. “Okay, yeah. In the circumstances, all that seems pretty reasonable.”

Did it? This view of things had never occurred to me. I thought I’d just been an arsehole. A coward who had fallen over at his life’s first real adversity and lost control of everything. His arm tightened—gently, not demanding, leaving it up to me whether I leaned in towards him. Whether I surrendered. He raised his other hand and pushed my fringe back, and I reflected, as his mouth brushed warmly at its roots, that he’d found a place on me that even Joe had never kissed, the widow’s peak. The gesture sent shivers through me. My eyes closed. When he leaned back on the sofa, I went with him, turning my face to his shoulder.

Another trouble with breakups—the instant loss of the dozens of daily touches, the background tapestry of comfort, given and received. You can screw your way through half a city’s population and never get that back. I had been starving for it without knowing. I pressed myself to him, feeling his embrace close round me, hard and strong, so tight my ribs popped. Grief went through me, but this time instead of crawling like sickness, it seemed to ring like bells over hard-frosted fields, plangent and clear. It wasn’t spineless, was it—not cowardly, pathetic, any of the other names I’d been calling myself? To weep for Joe, for this kind of loss; even briefly to want to die of it. *“Pretty reasonable,”* Aaron had said. My throat filled with hot salt. “Poor bastard,” Aaron whispered. “You’re in bits, aren’t you? Poor sod. You’ll be all right; you’ll be all right.”

We had lunch when I was capable of raising my head again, of speaking and making sense. He was nice about the casserole, which somehow hadn’t burned, and we sat for a long time, talking about some of the stuff we hadn’t had a chance to cover so far, what with all the street fights and fucking. He told me he’d gone out to the rigs straight from university, attracted by the money, the chance to leave behind a childhood in deprived western Cumbria that was as unpromising as my own had been. He’d enjoyed the cash and the experience and slowly come to realise the damage the oil industry was doing, its ultimate destructiveness in a world running dry of fossil fuels. He admitted without shame he was biting the hand that fed him, but hoped to do better in future—was using his off shifts to work towards his degree in engineering, studying the

structures needed to make alternative energy sources more than a nice idea.

It was good to hear him talk. We washed up together afterwards, looking out across the wintry roof garden I'd tried to keep alive for Joe. We were keeping to safe subjects—for my sake, I knew, to let me find my equilibrium. I'd cried until my sinuses were raw, and my chest was still aching, shuddering on deep in-breaths, a side effect I hadn't experienced since childhood. To make it easier on him and show him I could be calm, I volunteered the circumstances of Joe's leaving, told him I was selling the flat. He listened quietly, and I heard myself eventually say, "And…you? Anyone in your life at the moment?"

He took his gaze from the cold grey afternoon beyond the window, where it had just started to snow. "No," he said, folding a tea towel onto its rack. "Not at the moment."

And that was the problem with information legitimately gained. You had to trust the source. I didn't see how those clear eyes could lie to me, and I nodded, smiling uncertainly. "Good."

"Is that good?"

"Mm." I put my hands on his waist, pulled him towards me and kissed him. "Yes. That's good."

The bedroom was too much for me. Only as we stumbled through the door, kissing frantically, did I finally work out that the last time I had seen it was when Lou had turfed me out of it the night before, and the night before that, if I hadn't lain down in the rumpled bed to die, I certainly hadn't gone there to try and stay alive. And for Christ's sake, it was Joe's. I'd never brought anyone home. If two men could be said to have a marital bed, that had been ours, and I wasn't bloody ready. I stiffened in unwanted resistance. Aaron said, "Okay. Okay," clearly putting two and two together, and turned me around.

He steered me back into the kitchen. If he was seeking to distract me, he did it well—pulled out a chair for me and sat me down, then lithely straddled my lap. He picked up the kiss where he had left off, bracing his weight on his thighs and moving sinuously over me until my cock heaved up as if I hadn't been screwed six ways to sunset barely four hours previously, as if I'd never had it before in my life. He took a moment to dismount and strip off his briefs and jeans, and

stood before me, hot as hell in his unbuttoned shirt, stomach muscles rippling in the fabric's shadows, shaft blooming up dark with blood. "Lift up for me," he said, and together we pulled my trousers and underwear down my thighs far enough.

It took me a second to work out far enough for what. Events were moving too fast. And I'd stupidly thought, because he had taken the driver's seat for our first couple of rides—because he was refinement of the stereotype—that was his preference: that he would not like to be fucked. Now he took hold of the top bar of the chair and sat back down across my lap, moving with a slow grace it dried my mouth out to watch. He let his weight down, and my shaft found its target straightaway, despite the difficult angle. "Yes," he gasped. "Push up. Fuck me."

I obeyed, lost. Only his dry tightness and the sound he made when the head of my cock tried to broach him brought me back to recall of my manners and the basics. "Christ, wait! We need some lube. And…a rubber, for God's sake, you idiot. I…I haven't been good."

"Do *you* want to get up and get them?"

I stared up at him. He was watching me with a kind of grave merriment, and I realised he was capable of all sorts of mischief, that I shouldn't take his calm surface for the whole man. I said faintly, "Not in the slightest. Look, we…test one another in the hospital. The interns. I'm okay—somehow. But for you, gorgeous…Not taking any chances. Come on. Shift."

"Um. At the risk of losing your good opinion of me, maybe you don't have to…" I frowned in confusion, and he clarified, one corner of his smile tucking up a little tighter, "In my jacket. I never did expect to have much luck in the Powerhouse, but…Well. Hope springs eternal."

"Oh…" It took me a long few seconds to catch up, but then he was reaching over my shoulder, and I remembered he'd slung his coat round the back of the chair before we'd sat down to eat. I drew an unsteady breath. There was something very erotic in the thought of him getting dressed for the night in his riverside flat, shrugging into the soft leather jacket, making a check in its inside pocket, thinking about what might lie ahead. "Prepared is best," I whispered, watching half-hypnotised while those capable fingers popped a condom from the

packet and drew it adeptly down over my cock. “Don’t worry—your reputation’s quite safe with…”

I couldn’t finish. He had shifted back into position, and I could feel the fluttering gape of his entrance. “All right,” he got out. “Good. As for lube…” I saw him stretch one arm back, reaching blindly among the bottles and glasses on the table. “Oh yes. Luigi’s, extra virgin. Very nice.”

My eyes widened. “You’re fucking kidding, Aaron.”

“I’m really not, Matthew.” Uncapping the bottle, he poured a stream of green-gold oil into his palm.

“Oh God. Call me Matt. Oh God.”

He rode me gently but hard. I could have come within ten seconds of my cock sliding up into his body. The sounds he made as it entered, the spasms in his muscle ring brought my balls up tight, my load starting to strain for release. But I had to hang on for him. He was smiling down at me, pale skin flushed now, mouth a little swollen with arousal. I laid my hands on his thighs, shuddering at the feel of the hard, working muscle, the machinelike rhythm as he shifted up and down, bringing me deeper with every pulse until I’d reached so far inside him he barely needed to move for the impact, the pressure to jar us both closer to orgasm. I felt it start, gasped out a denial and clenched both hands so hard on him I knew he’d be bruised for days, then scrambled down off the peak. “Aaron, come on,” I whispered. “Let me…let me have you.”

“Yes. I want to. I…”

There it was again. That last restraint inside him, holding him back from the crest. Whose memory was he honouring? Whose image rose up just before he came? “Come back,” I pleaded, shifting my grip to his backside to try and draw him down an impossible last half inch. “If there’s somebody…making you feel bad, just…let it go…”

The green eyes clouded. “I told you. There’s no one.”

I closed my eyes in shame. Thought for one god-awful second I was going to lose him. But he had gone over the edge, and when I next could look, he had

flung back his hands to brace on the table behind him, his spine arching, a cry leaving him that had bright wires of anger and pain running through it as well as completion. And even as I jerked up to climax, I could have cut my bloody tongue out for what I had said, for questioning this great and enormous good the world had somehow thrown into my lap.

He held me, panting and shivering. My spent cock was still in him, held there by the aftershock contractions of his flesh. For a moment, he gave his whole weight over to me, and I groaned in pleasure; again, as he bent and stopped up my apology with a kiss. “Ssh. I’m not surprised. Not surprised, but…there’s no one, Matt. No one.”

We clung together. When I could, I let go the death grip I’d established on his firm backside, and lifted my hands to stroke his hair. The shirt he’d loaned me was soaked with his come, the skin of my belly beneath it too. God, still warm as blood. He grunted in discomfort and eased up a little, freeing me, and we both rocked with laughter at passion’s indignity. I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of his breath come and go in my hair.

The sound from downstairs was so familiar, so much a part of my old daily life that I didn’t take it in. Three clicks—two soft, one louder. Aaron, whose lovely head had drooped almost to my shoulder, suddenly stiffened and sat up. “Matt.”

I was almost asleep. “What?” I said, instinctively reaching to balance him as he stood up.

“Your front door…”

“What about it?”

In spite of circumstance, he grinned. “Somebody’s coming in, you dope. Who’s got the key?”

Chapter Seven

“Oh Christ.” I lurched to my feet. “Lou. The guy in the club last night, the…the one who’s not my boyfriend.” I glanced around. I wasn’t too bad—hauling up my pants and zip covered most of the damage, apart from the wet patches—but Aaron, this beautiful, inexplicable new phenomenon in my life, was naked from the waist down, and the idea of Lou clapping eyes on him like that made me feel sick. “Stay here,” I whispered. “I’ll sort it.”

Not just Lou. Before I could reach the kitchen door, I heard another voice, then a four-beat clatter of feet on the stairs. I saw the crown of Lou’s head, and I planted myself in the doorway. “Yes,” Lou was saying to the neatly suited stranger following him, “it’s nice and airy, isn’t it? The living room’s just to your left. The main bedroom is straight ahead, and…”

He jolted to a halt, clutching the banister. His companion almost ran into him. “Bloody hell, Matt. I didn’t know you were home.”

The best defence was offence. Even as the thought occurred, anger twisted in me—why should I damn well defend my presence here? Defending Aaron was another thing. I leaned my shoulder on the door frame, filling as much of it as I could. They’d have to go through me. “You could have called.”

“I’ve been calling you all morning. This is the agent from Reid’s. I told you he’d be coming round…” Lou’s startled gaze left mine and travelled to the open bedroom door. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. You know, Joe and Marnie aren’t asking you to do any of this apart from keeping the place tidy. It looks like a bomb hit. Please tell me you’ve cleared up the kitchen, because…”

Lou was pretty solid. I did my best to block him, but he had the advantage of momentum and temper and knocked my arm aside. I swung round to follow him. “Lou, you bastard—”

But there was no need to worry—or at least no reason apparent from Aaron’s elegant slouch in the kitchen chair. He was fully dressed and had somehow contrived to look as if he had been there for hours, drinking coffee and reading

the papers. From where I was standing, I could see Lou's face. The change in expression was fascinating, if not pleasant viewing. Like a landslide. From irritation, through a brief blank as he took Aaron in and then…disgust, a disappointment, as if despite everything, he had been holding out hope. I found myself wondering how long that had been going on. Me, Joe and Lou. We loved him, of course. He was part of our world. But always on the outside…"Okay," he said slowly, never taking his eyes off Aaron. "Kitchen looks all right. But for the future, can you let me know if you're gonna bring home one of your…"

Aaron sat up. Then, unhurriedly, he got to his feet. He wasn't that much taller than either of us, but as I'd seen before, he could make that inch or two look like ten. Lou went white. Aaron said pleasantly, "One of his what?"

Lou took a step backwards. As soon as he did, Aaron turned his attention to me, and it was like the beam from a powerful flashlight, dropping the rest of the world into darkness. "You don't want to sell this place, do you?"

"No. I've got no fucking choice."

"Okay. I tell you what. Go and grab the things you need, and come over to mine until it's sorted."

I stared at him. I think if I hadn't been leaning on the wall, I'd have dropped to my knees. He was so bloody beautiful, so real. Lou, his mouth hanging open, looked like a cardboard cutout in front of him. "That…that could take ages."

"Fine by me." He walked past Lou and past the poor estate agent, whose eyes were wide. He took me gently by the arm. "Come on. You'll be out of the way, and…" He paused, glancing back, sweeping Lou with those unsettling green eyes, as if he knew him inside out. He looked almost amused, and his voice became more devastatingly mild with every word. "And if Joe, Lou and Marnie want the place tidied up, they can come in and do it themselves."

It took me less than a minute to fill a holdall. I did so as steadily as I could. I had to do something to match Aaron's poise and not let him lead me out of my flat as if it were the wreckage of a crashed plane. I managed pretty well: walked past the agent and Lou in the hallway with my face straight and my gaze front and centre. I heard Lou say my name in what sounded almost like alarm, but I

didn’t look back.

Out on the pavement, Aaron’s arm went round my waist. I seized his hand. “Thank you.”

“It’s quite all right. Jesus, Matt—if they’d bust in five minutes sooner…”

I looked at him. I suspected my expression was absolutely grim, but something about it was making Aaron smile. I flashed back to our grinding, white-hot culmination on the kitchen chair—the passion that seemed to have fed on the slaking we’d given it earlier—and shook my head. “They’d have had to bloody wait till we were finished.”

I lived with Aaron for a week in the Quayside flat. If I say it was the best time of my life, that doesn’t quite cover it, because up until the previous June, my life—the adult part, anyway—had been rich and good. Joe had made me happy in a thousand ways I could never dismiss or forget. But it was as if Aaron opened the windows. The air in his mass-produced little apartment was breathable in a way I had never encountered before. I can’t describe the difference even now. With Joe, I’d moved along an expected track in a world I helped create from day to day. Aaron—I don’t know; it was as if he carried a larger universe around with him, stars in his black hair, far horizons in his eyes.

He was dead serious about his engineering degree, and if he let me drag him off to bed two or three times a day—on top of bruising, increasingly uninhibited interactions at night—he put in long hours at his desk in the living room too, turning over pages of the huge textbooks, his face grave and abstracted in the pale light from his laptop. The sight of him reminded me of a time when I, too, had happily lost myself in study. I made one brief and targeted run home to pick up my medical books, making sure no one was there, looking neither left nor right. Aaron made no comment when I lugged the pile of texts into his living room—just smiled and pulled up a chair for me on the far side of his desk.

I went to see my supervisor at the hospital on Monday morning. Lou had been right. I’d been sailing close to the wind, and it took a lot of persuading and a fairly clean breast of my crimes to convince her I was serious about my career. She set me a batch of catch-up assignments large enough to take my breath away. Well, I knew I needed to prove myself again. When Aaron saw the essay

list, he whistled, took the sheet from me, kissed me until I was seeing flashing lights from anoxia, then declared a moratorium on sex until the work was done. This proved a marvellous incentive. I put in forty-eight hours straight, and we spent the next day in bed making up for lost time.

It was almost a shock to realise Sunday was Christmas. I'd worked A&E wards over previous festive seasons and watched the suicide bids roll in. Nothing like a month or so of consistent reminders, from TV, colleagues and shop windows, that this was the season of family joy, to knock the lonely down, and I'd wondered how the hell I was going to get through. One of those firsts, like Joe's birthday and my own, that could rock the foundations. As it was, I took my courage in my hands and asked Aaron to come to my flat on the twenty-fourth and stay over for Christmas Day. We ought to be safe from viewers and surveyors then, and I could make us a proper elaborate lunch. Lay my ghosts about being there, and then for preference lay Aaron, right down on the hearth rug which had been Joe's favourite place for a fuck, and where, weirdly, he had chosen to end us.

Aaron accepted. Despite everything, he seemed a bit surprised to be asked, colouring a little with pleasure. That was another thing about him—he was wonderfully easy to please. He wouldn't take a penny for my food or keep, so I slipped out to the Laing Art Gallery and bought him a top-end reproduction of their *Interior of the Central Station* by Dobson and Carmichael. It was a shot in the dark, but somehow I just felt it was him. I had it framed that afternoon and remembered my DIY skills to do a nice job of getting it hung up on his living-room wall before he came home. His reaction was perfect—silent astonishment, a perusal of the soaring pillars and fan vaulting from all angles and then his hand going out, blindly reaching for mine. *"God, Matt. You got this for me?"*

And on Friday, I fucked it all up. Aaron got a phone call early in the morning, on the landline by his bed. I was too sleepy to stir and didn't lift my head while he asked the caller to hang on. To wait while he picked up the call in the other room.

He was being considerate. I sat up, wrapping my arms round my knees. I heard the living-room door open and very quietly close. When he came back to bed, he was pale. I waited for him to talk, and when he didn't, something kept me from asking. He put his arms round me but shivered out from under my returning

embrace, dived down the bed and put his mouth on me. Sucked me off almost feverishly, moaning and swallowing deeply when I came. When I reached for him, he said, “Can you keep it for later, love? I’ve got to go out today.” It was his first endearment. The first time he hadn’t looked me in the eyes.

If he’d told me *today* would be all day, I might have been all right. I was at first, even after Lou texted me to say there’d been an offer on the flat. I put in a shift on the children’s ward and handed in my assignments to Dr. Andrews, who received them with a raised eyebrow and a nod of acknowledgement. When I got back to the flat, the early-winter dark was down, and I half expected Aaron to be back, brewing up his jet fuel–strength coffee in the kitchen, stepping silently behind the door to ambush me, a trick that just got better with the playing. But the rooms were as dark as the night outside. The only source of light in the living room was his laptop. The lid was up, a screen saver of geometric forms rolling over the screen.

I sat down at the desk. I must have brushed the mouse with my elbow, because the saver flickered off. I suppose if I’d been thinking straight, I would have worked out that a man with real secrets to keep would never have been so careless as to leave his e-mail open. But I was stupid. I got up and walked around the flat’s confines. Aaron had asked me, with a casual ease that enabled me to answer, if I would like him to chuck out the odd bottle of wine and scotch he kept around the place, but if I was going to stay on the wagon—and it seemed I was—I thought it best not to create false environments, and all this week had drunk juice and mineral water without a second thought.

I poured myself a glass of wine and sat back down. It was only one, I told myself. And I would only read one e-mail. One wouldn’t hurt.

It was late when Aaron got back—late enough for me to have gone to bed. I lay on my side, my back turned to the door, feigning sleep while he moved softly round the room. I waited for the dip of the mattress beside me, but it never came. After a while, I heard the click of the bedside light being turned off and the soft closing of the door.

Alone, I cracked open my dryly aching eyes and saw by streetlight what he had left me—a big glass of water, complete with ice, and a bowl by the side of

the bed…Almost too numbed out and sick to care, I turned my face into the pillow. I hadn't, then, hidden my tracks. A week of sobriety had lowered my resistance, and I couldn't remember what I'd done with the empty wine bottle. Left it beside his computer, probably. Beside the open e-mail.

You couldn't read just one, of course, any more than I could have stopped after one glass of the velvety red Hardys. Like most people, Aaron and Rosie e-mailed in replies to each other, creating a string, so even though I'd only opened one, I'd read down through nine or ten of their exchanges before my vision blurred.

I didn't remember much of the content. Who would, with love letters? There wasn't much to be remembered, although Rosie must have been on his engineering course, because after some of the outpourings, there were incongruous sidetracks into hydrogen fuel-cell technology and what they each thought of each other's ideas regarding supercavitation, whatever the fuck that might be. Other than that, the letters were just what you'd expect—meaningless, except to the parties concerned. God, they loved each other, though. Rosie's exclamations over Aaron's beauty, his kindness, his power and courtesy in bed were all things I'd have liked to tell him myself. Aaron's responses, though more restrained, were full of affection and more lyrical than I'd have given him credit for. He spoke to her in a way I couldn't imagine him ever speaking to me, and it broke me, cracked me quietly along the faults I'd thought might be healing.

I fell into a restless sleep and dreamed of them. Sometimes she was the Rosie of my imagination, dark and slender, lying in a nice suburban bedroom with her arms held out for him, smiling a welcome. Then she flickered and morphed and turned into Marnie and then Joe, and Joe fucked Aaron hard from behind and looked up straight into my eyes where I stood helplessly watching and snarled, *You don't deserve him, you fucking loser.* I woke up choking and sobbing, struggling upright in the bed. Oh Jesus. What had I done? I disentangled from the sheets and stood, head pounding, stomach hot and tight.

I thought that he had gone. When I saw his elegant shape stretched out beneath a blanket on the sofa, my head spun with relief. To my astonishment, when I crept across the dark room and knelt by him, he pushed up on one elbow straightaway. "Matt," he said hoarsely. "How are you feeling?"

There were no words to tell him how bad. I just bowed my head, closing my eyes on hot tears as he moved his hand over my hair. I got out, “I’m sorry,” and he grabbed my armpits and hauled me up to sit by him. I shivered, and he put the blanket round my shoulders. “Don’t make a deal of it,” he murmured. “Just start again tomorrow if that’s still what you want. Clean slate.”

I leaned into his arms. He meant the bloody booze. Maybe that was all there was for him to mean—maybe I’d got away with it, left his computer as I’d found it. My head ached fiercely. I’d forgotten what a red-wine hangover felt like. It was sweet beyond belief to let my brow rest in the junction of his neck and shoulder, where the skin was smooth and cool, and his sun-on-sand fragrance most intense. Leaning his chin very softly on the top of my skull, he said calmly, “Did you find out what you wanted to know?”

Hope died. I let go a breath that turned into a moan. “Oh Christ. *Aaron.*…”

“It’s okay.” I heard the smile resting in his voice. “More or less, anyway. I more or less understand, after what you’ve been through. But…please don’t ever do anything like that again. I’ve told you the truth.”

But you haven’t. I lay against him in silence, rigid with self-disgust and incomprehension. Was he one of those men who genuinely didn’t know when he was lying—a psychopath or schizophrenic, maybe? Sitting opposite him at the table or our shared desk, rocking with him in the throes of a face-to-face fuck, I thought I’d never looked into a saner pair of eyes, but what the hell did I know? I’d believed Joe—who was also technically sane—for two years.

I could hardly challenge him on information I’d gained by violating his e-mails. His arm around me, treacherous or not, was warm; his touch still the sweetest thing I knew…After almost a minute, he yawned, rubbing his cheekbone on my scalp. “All right,” he said. “You’re freezing cold, and I’ve got a kink in my spine. We’ll both be better off back in bed.”

Chapter Eight

I had volunteered for two long Christmas Eve shifts, partly in a shameless desire to reingratiate myself with Dr. Andrews, partly to get the next day off. Aaron, who clearly took the business of forgiveness seriously, brought me breakfast in bed, and we parted affectionately, arranging to meet at the Metro station that night. Standing in the hallway, after giving my pallid face an anxious once-over, he had smiled and said, “I’m not sure what this is yet, but our first bust-up feels like a milestone,” and he’d given me one of his benediction kisses, the ones that bypassed all my erogenous zones and buried themselves in my heart.

Not much of a bust-up, I thought, sitting at a table in the canteen to recover after giving my fifth piece of bad news in the cancer ward upstairs. I’d done something unforgiveable, and he’d let it go with a smile and a breakfast tray of strong coffee, orange juice, toast and two aspirin. As for what this was, what we were to each other, I didn’t know either. I only knew my own part, brought home to me sharply when he’d told me he was due back on the rig the following Wednesday, his voice, his touch, his unstinting kindness put beyond my reach for a whole month: I’d fallen in love with him.

With a man who belonged, resoundingly, to someone else. Who seemed to be living some kind of double life so efficiently that not only could I feel thoroughly loved in return, but Rosie, off in her semidetached in the suburbs, was perfectly happy too. And where the fuck was that about to go? We both acknowledged each other—his lady for his surface life and church on Sundays, and his gay lover for the Powerhouse nights—and somehow shared him?

I tried to rest my face in my hands but only ended up knocking over my coffee. As I mopped up with paper napkins, I reflected that I was putting my cart way before the bloody horse. All right. I loved him. He’d never indicated the equivalent, and if all his actions seemed to declare it, maybe he was just like that with every boyfriend—so attentive, so adept at drawing from our bodies climax after toe-curling climax, so damned *nice* that anyone not made of stone must routinely fall for him within his fortnight’s leave. Maybe there were dozens of us, and the long term wouldn’t get the chance to be a problem.

I looked up at the canteen's grimy ceiling. In the wards above me, vast dramas of life and death were playing themselves out beneath the tinsel streamers. Most of them were quiet and restrained—a shadow on an x-ray, hope draining from a human face to be replaced by mortal fear. Words, options, diagnoses. *How long do I have left?* I tried, always, to speak gently and with absolute truth, to feel how it would feel if it were me. But it wasn't. For all my misadventures, I was here and well, my blood clean, with nothing worse than a fading hangover to mar Christmas. I didn't know what I was to Aaron, but to me, he was—oh God, so much—warmth and life, proof I could, despite all post-Joe expectations, find it in my heart to fall in love again. I had three more days left with him. If he was lying, couldn't I accept that, given what he was, his reasons must be good?

My pager buzzed, and I stood up, checking the coffee hadn't spattered my white coat. Nothing less inspiring to a frightened patient than a dirty, bleary-eyed intern. All I could do was give the day—the hour, the moment—my best. The rest, for now, could take care of itself…

Aaron and I collided in a clatter of laughter and glass. I pushed back reluctantly from his embrace—the first one he'd offered in public, a massive bear hug under the Metro station neon, turning heads across the ticket hall—and laid a hand on the neck of the champagne bottle that had risen between us in absurd symbolism from his carrier bag. "What's this?" I asked, not neglecting to give the rounded cork a caress. "Are you *trying* to unleash the beast?"

He grinned down at me. "This is for over Christmas lunch. You can handle it, can't you?"

In his own quiet way, he was a great advocate of personal freedom and personal responsibility, this Aaron. He'd look after me to an extent, then help me look after myself. Insist I do so, probably. "Yes," I said, convinced by his conviction that I could. "Great. Thank you."

"And before I chicken out…Here." He rummaged in one pocket and produced a small blue cardboard box. I felt my mouth go dry. I didn't know what was in it, but I knew the jeweller's logo. "Small present. No big deal."

"God, Aaron. I didn't get you anything. I didn't know…"

“Where you stood. I know that. I’m sorry I haven’t been able to talk to you more. Can you stand it?”

“I…think I’m learning to love it.” I glanced up, letting him take that however he pleased. “Do I open this now?”

“God no. When we get home. When I’m out the back…chopping logs or whatever, for preference, so I can fade back into the forest if I have to. Come on! I’m freezing my arse off here.”

There was a feeling of a whole world shutting down. The most determined of last-minute shoppers had been finishing up as I walked through town, the most obliging of shops closing their doors. The night was cold and clear. A little starlight was making its way through cobweb clouds and neon, catching the pale strands in Aaron’s hair. Christmas trees in every other window we passed set their lights in his eyes. I walked at his side, trying to keep coherent thought together and make conversation. My fingers closed round the little box, which I’d tucked into my coat’s deepest pocket. A few days before, he’d come with me into the Northern Goldsmiths jeweller’s to help me choose a present for my sister. He’d been beautiful in there too—almost as lovely as he was now, the lights and the shimmer around him seeming to call out his own. I’d talked—I think I’d given him a little lecture—about my distaste for rings, for civil ceremonies, all the trappings of a mainstream society which had never honoured, helped or even acknowledged my choice of partnership, so why should I ape its symbols? Nevertheless, I’d looked for a while at a broad, plain silver band and admitted, when Aaron raised a brow, that if I *had* been going to bow to convention, that might have been where I would start.

As usual I was jumping ahead of my facts. The box could contain anything. And if I thought about it, what would Aaron be doing giving me a bloody ring? I knew—we both knew—he was not heart-whole. Not in a position to be offering signs of commitment and trust. Oh God, I didn’t understand—and suddenly I needed to, burningly. We were almost outside my flat. I put my hand into the crook of his arm, drawing him gently to a halt. “Aaron, love. Tell me, please. Who is—”

“Matthew!”

I spun round. Felt Aaron turning with me, to look at the open front door to my flat, which was unexpectedly ablaze with light. A figure was silhouetted in the doorway. For a moment, irritation seized me. God, was nothing sacred? I couldn't believe even Lou would let in a viewer at eight o'clock on Christmas Eve…

The figure moved, began an uncertain track towards me down the path, then broke into a run. "Matthew. Mattie, sweetheart! Matt!"

Joe. I couldn't get a word out. He launched himself at me from three feet away, and I caught him on reflex, falling back against the frost and ivy on the garden wall. Instinctively I shielded him from too hard a meeting with the brickwork, and his embrace closed round me—so tight, so familiar, it was for an instant as if he had never been gone. The scent of his hair filled my nostrils. Johnson's shampoo, an economical habit from council-house days that he'd never altered. It paralysed me. "Joe," I choked out, helplessly grasping at him. His rangy, rawboned frame, sometimes feeling barely different from that of the skinny, scab-kneed boy who'd run at my side through hostile Shieldwell streets and parks. "What the…fuck are you doing here?"

"Home. Come home for Christmas, Matt. Come home for good."

I got my hands onto his shoulders and heaved him back, far enough to see his face. Yes, he was crying. Joe never cried. I looked beyond him to Aaron, who had backed up to the gate. His expression was unreadable, just as it had been the night I first set eyes on him under the Powerhouse lights. And all of his had gone out. "Aaron…"

He quirked a smile. "There you go," he said, softly. "You'll be okay now. Not a bad Christmas present, eh?"

"Aaron, no. Joe, please. Back up for a second. This is…"

"Aaron?" Joe echoed, letting me go. He swept me and then Aaron with a bright, assessing gaze. I couldn't remember when his eyes had gained that calculating light, like he was taking somebody's measure, and not kindly. "Pleased to meet you," he said, holding out a hand. His other was closed tight on my upper arm. "And you are…?"

“A mate,” Aaron responded calmly. He shook the hand offered him. “I live up the road. Just walking Matthew home.” He gave us both a nod, the faint smile still in place, and began to turn away.

“Don’t!” I gasped, not sure what I wanted to prevent or deny. My heart was pounding wildly up under my ribs. Joe was here. Joe was back. My fucked-up head was having one last game with me, I thought, and whipped round to check. Yes. He was there, seizing my chilly face in both warm hands and stilling it, staring at me. I could have it all back. It hadn’t been perfect, but what was? It had been my life. My partner, my home, my day to day. Our circle of friends, our nice holidays, our evenings and our weekends…I said, lamely, hardly knowing why, “I think it’s too late. The place is more or less sold.”

“Oh, bugger that! That was all Marnie. I talked about you one time too often, and she freaked out and told me to sell the flat to prove she came first. I tell you what…” He released my face, whirled me round by the shoulders until I was looking at the agency sign on its wooden post by the gate. “Let’s get rid of this now.” He reached up, grabbed the sign by its little red and white two-bed-terrace label and began to tug.

And that would never bring it down. I don’t know what came over me. Adrenaline or hysteria maybe. Joe and I had been partners in crime for our entire lives. If he wanted to graffiti-tag the railway bridge higher than anyone else, I would give him a leg up. He would hang on to the seat of my pants while I dangled over the top to make my mark. Wild laughter burst from me, and I sprang up onto the garden wall and grabbed the sign at the top. “All right!” I yelled, getting a grip. “Pull now!”

They made the damn things pretty sturdy. After ten seconds or so, we both gave up and stood staring at each other, breathless. Slowly I realised I could see the whole street from here. That the street and our gateway and the garden were all empty, except for the two of us. “Aaron,” I said, voice still unsteady with laughter. “Joe, did you…I didn’t even see him go.”

“Well, he’s gone. Very discreet.” Joe held up his hands, and I took them automatically and jumped down off the wall. “Who was he? And don’t tell me your mate. He was bloody gorgeous.” Not waiting for my answer, he wrapped an arm around my waist. “Fast going, Mattie! See—didn’t I tell you you’d do okay

without me?”

Air left my lungs. “Joe, you…you’ve got no idea.”

“Well. All that’s over now, sweetheart.” The arm tightened, and I found myself being half tugged, half guided towards the open door. “Come on. Come on in, and let’s start over…Oh, wait up. Grab that plastic bag—don’t leave your champagne behind…”

I sat with my coat still on, in the living room of my old home. It was very cold. Joe was rattling back and forth between the fire and the kitchen, switching on lights, chattering. He was back. I’d been given the one thing I’d wanted, and with perfect Christmas timing.

There were lines in T.S. Eliot. I couldn’t remember which poem they were from, and hadn’t paid them much attention at school, but somehow nevertheless they had stayed with me. Something about the passage of time, and the way the world answers what we think are our needs. “She gives when our attention is distracted / And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions / That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late / What’s not believed in, or if still believed, / In memory only, reconsidered passion.” I hadn’t liked those words. My twelve-year-old heart had rejected them, even while my brain recorded. They meant, didn’t they, I could want something forever—like getting into the Gateshead football squad—and burn and yearn and work my arse off for it, and when it came, it might not be worth it. Not even what I wanted anymore.

The Picture of Dorian Gray was a tough one for preteens, as well. I had just the faintest suspicion—nothing concrete, mind—that Dorian and the artist who paints him and maybe even the author of the story himself were all batting for my team and Joe’s. Not that I was about to impart this to our poor English mistress, who had wanted to enter a convent and instead ended up teaching forty sneering council brats in Shields. Back then, being young, I hadn’t thought much of Wilde’s theory that the inner life could taint the outer man, make such differences to him that a portrait in the attic taking all the hits and moral decay on your behalf could be an invaluable asset. Back then, no matter what Joe and I had been up to, we could raise such clear and incorrupted eyes to teachers and to parents that, unless they had proof, we got away with everything.

Joe hadn’t got round yet to the lamps we had scattered around the front room, soft ones on low tables that shed light through coloured glass or nice silk shades. The overhead was on, a pale yellow glare. “Joe,” I said as he came back into the room, and something in my voice made him stop. “Sit down a minute.”

“In a bit. Just gonna make us a cup of tea, and…”

“No. Now. Please.”

He obeyed. I think he knew then the game was up, that whatever sweeping, overwhelming thing he’d meant to do, it was no good. He sank onto the edge of an armchair opposite to me. Perhaps he was just tired—or maybe two years of steadfast deception *had* done their work on his once-open, sweet-natured face. He looked…faded, and there was a twist to his smile I hadn’t seen before.

I was sure I was altered too. He said uncomfortably, “Come on, Mattie. I’ve got things to do.”

No one else in the world called me *Mattie,* not unless they wanted a punch in the mouth that had formed the word. It was a name from our deepest past, from bloody nursery school, for God’s sake, when Joe had been too young to pronounce my real one. I said, throat burning, “Marnie must be devastated.”

He shrugged. “Well. You know Marnie.”

“No, I don’t. I only met her a handful of times before you left. Where is she?”

“She’s at home.”

Home. Leaning forward, I propped my elbows on my knees and ran both hands through my hair. I knew this would make it stick up like electrified wheat, but it helped me to think, to begin to get some fragile grip on what the fuck was going on here. “Okay,” I said wearily. “Okay. Here’s what I think is happening. If I’m wrong…” I tailed off, choking a bit. My chest felt dry and sore. “If you want to stop me at any point, go ahead. Marnie’s at home. You haven’t told her you’re here. You’ve brought…just enough clothes to get by for the night and your spare toothbrush, nothing she’s actually gonna notice is missing. If things go all right here, well and good. And if not—if it all goes tits up, you’re going to pick up your rucksack and go quietly home. To Marnie. Is that right?”

A terrible, hard-edged silence descended, weary and tarnished as the light. “Come on, Joe,” I said. “Whatever you tell me, I’ll believe it. You know I will. So make it good.”

He lifted his head. He had been staring at the hearthside rug, where so much had gone on, but now he looked at me. His eyes were dry and empty. He said, hoarsely, “You don’t understand, Matt. I thought it was right, but…I can’t even fuck her.”

Walking out was easy: I only had one small rucksack of my own. Picking it up, I fished in my pocket and tossed Joe my set of keys. He didn’t try to catch them but flinched from them, and they clattered down onto the hearth. I thought he might follow me, but he did not. The street was deserted, painted in coloured lights, beginning to be hushed with snow. I didn’t know what time the Metros stopped on Christmas Eve, but now was the time to find out. I ran.

I got no response to my pounding on the Quayside flat’s door, and reluctantly—Aaron’s privacy seeming doubly sacred now—I let myself in. I hadn’t thought much about it at the time, but he’d placed a lot of faith in me, hadn’t he, giving me my own key on the second day of my stay with him, as soon as he could get one cut. A nice return I’d made him for his trust.

I scanned the flat’s sparse rooms. It barely took a minute to establish Aaron was not just out, but gone. Unlike Joe, he’d taken things he really needed for a proper stay, and I wondered—sick at heart, unable to stop myself—how pleased Rosie would be to see him. Home for Christmas after all…Turning on my heel, I walked out.

Chapter Nine

I realised halfway down the corridor that I had no idea of where I was going, and slackened my pace. A dull blade of loss began to push its way under my heart. I tried his mobile number for the nineteenth time and got nothing. Well, I wouldn't answer to me either, in his place. His last sight of me, I had been clasped in my ex-lover's arms, or maybe leaping about laughing like a bloody chimp on the wall, paying no attention to his retreat, his sudden, total disappearance from my world, an instant of time I would happily have traded the rest of my life to recover.

A lock clicked down the corridor behind me, and despite knowing Aaron's flat was empty, I spun round in stupid hope. A stocky man in his midfifties was lugging what looked like a huge navy kit bag out through his front door. He locked up behind him, shouldered the bag and set off towards me. As he drew near, he gave me a vague but friendly smile. "Evening. You all right? Looking for someone?"

No harm in trying. "Er, yes. Aaron, who lives a few doors down from you…I don't suppose you know where he is?"

"Aaron West? Works for Sunsol Oil? Yeah, I ran into him on my way in. Said he was going out early for the Christmas shift."

"On the…on the rig?"

"Yeah. Me too, worse luck." He hefted the kit bag, grinning. "Mind, the pay's spectacular. Triple time. Can't turn that down, not with my brood. Can I give him a message for you?"

"Yes. Yes, please." I thought fast. What the hell could I say? Just the news that he'd gone back to work instead of the house in the suburbs had lifted my heart, but then again, his work was two hundred miles away on a speck of metal in a dark, howling ocean. Maybe I was more unbearable even than I'd given myself credit for. "I keep trying his mobile, but…"

“Oh, he’ll be on the chopper by now. I’m going out by the second one. You’ll be lucky if he gets a signal once he’s on the Kittiwake too. Still, anything I can tell him for you…”

I decided on formality. Maybe Aaron didn’t want his colleagues to know that his feckless, ungrateful gay lover was running about seeking any last desperate chance to put things right. “Okay. Thank you. My name’s Dr.—”

“Dr. Barnes?” I blinked at him. Before I could open my mouth to say no, he set the heavy kit bag down. “Ah right. The new medical assistant. I get it. He was meant to meet you and escort you out, I bet. Oh, that’s typical Westie—great guy, the best, but if it’s not about hydrogen fuel-cell tech, it doesn’t really register…Well, don’t worry. I can give you a ride. Is that all your kit? Did you have your stuff sent out ahead?”

I gave a kind of affirmative grunt. I heard it with astonishment. What the fuck was I doing? My new friend—Dave Wycliffe, he told me over his shoulder, lugging his bag off the floor once more and heading towards the lift—didn’t give me a chance to insert another word edgeways, and I rode in the slipstream of his chatter all the way down to the ground floor and into the car park. When I was sitting in the passenger seat next to him, I finally allowed myself to realise my intentions. My blood ran hot and cold at the same time. Christ…I’d end up shot or tied up on the next boat for G Bay…

Wycliffe was starting the engine. He glanced across at me. “You all right, son? Been out on the rigs before?” I shook my head, unable to trust my voice. “You’ll be fine. It’s the chopper ride you want to worry about. Fucking horrible.” He seemed to find this hilarious and roared with laughter as he gunned the car out onto the road. “I hope they pay you lads triple time for the Santa shift, as well.”

I had to say something. “Is that why Aaron—Mr. West…Is that why he does it? For his family, like you?” I immediately flinched and regretted it. Calling him *Mr. West* didn’t make the question any less personal, any less likely to come from a stranger. But Wycliffe didn’t seem to find it odd—burst into laughter again. “Family? Westie? Not very likely, Doc.” He leaned forward, squinting against headlights, then eased into the traffic stream flowing south to the High Level Bridge. “Not your family man, so to speak. I don’t know what you’d call it these days—the politically correct term. *Confirmed bachelor,* shall we say. Nice

enough lad, though. Don't know how he gets away with it, with all us roughnecks out on the rig, but nobody messes with him, anyway. What about you, Doc? Wife? Kids?"

I didn't have the strength to invent any. Mercifully, before I had to explain the incurable nature of my own bachelor status, he had pulled a photo off the dash and started telling me about Mrs. Dave and his many offspring, and after that I only had to listen.

The guard at the Baltic Road docks checkpoint was unimpressed with my frantic search for Sunsol ID in the pockets of my jacket and jeans. I didn't think I was doing too badly, considering I knew I'd never find it. Putting a good deal of worried sincerity into the act. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I…"

"ID and appointment note," the guard repeated for the third time, his head stuck through the wound-down passenger window. A sense of total unreality swept me. Whatever I was playing at, this was the end of the game. I opened my mouth to hurry it along. But Wycliffe leaned suddenly in across my lap. "Oh, come on, Finch," he said. "Don't be an arse. This is the new medical boy. Westie was supposed to pick him up, and the dozy sod's forgot all about him and gone off. Probably got his papers too."

I mimicked relieved surprise. "Oh God. Yes. That'll be where they are. I gave them to him the other day, and…"

"All right, all right." The guard gestured forward, clearly bored of the exchange. "Go ahead, Dave. Merry fucking Christmas to you."

The car bumped over pitted tarmac. Around me, I began to see vast industrial shapes emerging from the darkness. I didn't know what to expect of an oil company's shore terminal, but perhaps the Kittiwake's new AMO was expected to be pretty green, and the good-natured Wycliffe, having run out of family to describe, contented himself with pointing out the various processing towers and storage units along our route. My mind was floating somewhere up among the arc lights that illuminated the whole bleak, superscaled scene, but I found myself trying to retain some of the names and functions. In case I need to make polite conversation later on, I thought, a bit hysterically, and decided I should add in some good manners at this point. "It's very good of you to bring me down here,

Mr. Wycliffe. I'd have been stuck otherwise."

"Dave," he corrected me, slowing up as we passed a flat expanse of concrete behind wire fencing. "No trouble at all. They're lucky to get a decent medic out on that old tub. Well, there she is—your chariot for the night. AS332 Super Puma, pretty reliable…" He paused, face twisting oddly, then shook his head. "Most of the time. Looks like they're warming her up. We'd best get moving."

I followed Wycliffe through what felt like miles of neon corridors and into a locker room, where he sized me up with a glance and tossed me the kind of coveralls I recognised from TV programmes as a survival suit. I dragged it on with fingers almost too damp and numb to do the job and had to stand, looking into the middle distance, while he pulled tight for me its various straps. Any minute, I knew, I would either wake up or this charade would end. Wycliffe, no matter how friendly and obliging, would see through my impostor's shell, which had grown up to encase me almost without my realisation or consent. I'd ridden out here on the tide of his assumptions…"All right?" he said, after showing me how the life jacket worked and how to find the whistle that was sure to draw rescue down on me straightaway, if we ditched in the boundless black maelstrom of the North Sea. "You're a bit of a funny colour. I'll give Westie a good talking-to for leaving you to look after yourself…Come on. I can hear her powering up."

When we emerged onto the apron on the far side of the block, I realised that the helicopter I'd seen from the road was about five times the size I'd thought, a monster of black and yellow steel, its rotors conspiring with the wind to create a roar like the end of the world. I fell back involuntarily. Wycliffe turned, grinning. "Not ridden one of these bitches before?"

"No." I reckoned I'd better say something professional, and racked my brains. "Did a bit of evac training with the hospital, but…" That was good. It happened to be true as well, and I shut my mouth before my voice could falter.

"Well, you're still not quite dressed for it." Wycliffe dived back into the glassed-in office and returned a second later with a bright orange oilskin like his own. "Put that on. Right." Other men were gathering around us, about a dozen of them, though I'd almost lost the ability to count. They were glancing at me: Wycliffe was yelling my assumed name and status. Then he grabbed my arm. "Okay, Doc, we're off. Duck your head right down and take a run for it."

I could say no. I could lay down the charade right here. The hot water I would be in, the humiliation would be as nothing compared to the fear climbing up in my throat. I gave it a second of thought.

And that fear was nothing, was dust in the face of losing Aaron. Of living for even one night with the knowledge that he thought himself rejected. Every instant he thought I was passing in Joe's arms, in the warm, well-lit flat where I had tried to take him home, burned on my skin like a brand. Wycliffe, taking my stillness for a paralysis of fear, pulled me forward. "Christ, you are a rookie, aren't you? Get your bloody head down and run!"

The flight took an hour and a half. After the first ten minutes or so—the brief exhilaration of ascent, which even in these circumstances was a breath-stealing kick—I closed my eyes and focussed on getting from one breath to the next without freaking out and demanding to be put back down. The wind seized us in its fist. For every blow it dealt, I felt the pilots slug it back, and every impact jarred straight through my spine. Even strapped tight to my seat, it was like being a pebble kicked in a tin can, and I was grateful that my position near the tail kept my clench-jawed terror hidden from most of the dozen other men making the trip. For a while they yelled at one another cheerfully over the roar of the engines. Then the storm increased, and even the most stalwart fell into a thoughtful silence. Dave Wycliffe, seated next to me, who had given my white-knuckled hand a friendly pat or two during our ascent, turned his attentions to the black window, where rain lashed the glass as if hurled from a bucket.

I was alone. In a space between the worlds. Behind me was a harbour where I could still find shelter if I capitulated to Joe, accepted him for what he was. In front of me—only unknowns. I had flung myself out into the night. I felt my grip on reality begin to slide, a plunging loss of bearings and identity. If this frail craft went down, I would drop untraceably into the void. What the fuck was I? A flicker in the dark yearning hopelessly towards another, which perhaps had forgotten my existence by now.

The helicopter jounced violently and tipped to the side. I experienced some tiny, distant relief that mine was not the only gasp extorted by the movement. It had wedged my hip against the bulkhead. Slowly I became aware of a pressure, a small angular shape, trapped between my skin and the metal.

Oh, Aaron. My throat closed at the thought of him. Half convinced every pitch of the craft would be its last, I undid enough zips and straps on the survival suit and reached inside. It was an awkward stretch into the pocket of my coat. With trembling hands, I withdrew the little cardboard box and eased it open.

Broad, plain, heavy. Warming in my hand with a weight like a kiss pressed to the palm. I closed my fingers round it, tighter and tighter, until I could feel its circle burning deep into my flesh. I would never put it on—not unless he put it on me. I clutched it like a star, as the storm raged harder and the rotor blades began to wail for purchase on the air.

"Take it easy with him, Jens. He's had a rough trip out, even by my standards."

I raised my eyes from the concrete. There was an almost infinite stretch of it beneath my feet, and it was not moving. Almost infinite—in the far distance, between gigantic scaffolds and towers made of girders and chains, I could see an edge. Beyond it, darkness. A hand was clenched tight on my elbow, and I suddenly remembered the lurch of my guts as the chopper dropped through nothing, and the thud of heavy impact. Being unable to unfasten my belt, and hands reaching to do it for me. A crowded struggle down some metal stairs.

"You're telling me. We had the rescue boat ready to go. Who the hell is he?"

The man in front of me was dressed from head to toe in orange slicks. In one hand, he held a clipboard protected by a plastic bag. He was marking off the names of the crew as they disembarked. I had thought it wet and windy back at Baltic Road. I'd had no idea. Here, the gale arrived in flying wedges, each one accompanied by a blast of horizontal rain. I could hardly breathe. The man holding me up—Dave, I remembered—was obviously experienced in making his lungs and his voice work in spite of it. "Barnes," he bellowed cheerfully. "The new medical assistant. Bloody Westie was meant to bring him out. He forgot him. Dr. Barnes, this is our ops team leader, Jens Larsen."

"That's nice," Larsen yelled back. "I'm not surprised Aaron forgot, Dave. Barnes isn't due out for another two weeks. So like I say—who the fuck's he?"

"What? He said he was…" Suddenly the grip on my elbow disappeared. I staggered, feeling the platform yaw, a muscle memory of flight. Wycliffe had his

hand in the air and was beckoning someone over the heads of the dispersing crowd on the helipad. “Hang on. There he is. West! Over here!”

He was in front of me. He strode through the flow of men heading in the other direction, and I saw how they parted for him. I remembered him as I had first seen him—black leather and tight-fitting vest—and I remembered how he looked in early mornings, wandering around the flat with a T-shirt on over his pyjama bottoms, smiling and holding out an arm to me even though we’d just spent the whole night entwined. He was alluring, welcoming or forbidding just as he chose, and out here…out here, plainly it suited his purposes to be a sheer granite cliff. I saw in an instant why he never had any trouble from his coworkers. And he was, as always, devastating. He made the ghastly waterproofs look tailored. His short black crop was plastered down with rain. He had his usual crown of stars, the silver hairs picking up lights from the gantries. His face was stripped of all expression, a pure pale mask. You would no more mess with him than with the churchyard statue of some avenging angel. His eyes came up to meet mine.

“Westie,” Wycliffe began again, having one last go. “This is Barnes, isn’t it? The new medical assistant?”

Aaron’s gaze did not leave my face. If he didn’t acknowledge me, I wasn’t going to press the issue, I decided. They could throw me overboard, which I probably deserved, and Aaron could get on with his life. He said softly, voice carrying all the same over the wind and the dying thump of the rotors, “Who told you that, Dave?”

Chapter Ten

I saw Dave reviewing the last few hours of his life. Replaying, as I was, who had said what to whom. After a moment he took a step back, looking at me with new eyes. He blew his cheeks out and gave a tug at his souwester hood. “I…I suppose I told *him.* Well, I’ll be buggered! No offence, Westie.”

Aaron almost smiled. “None taken. How the hell did he get out here?”

It was an odd question. I didn’t think there was a bus. Wycliffe looked puzzled too. “Same way I did. On that thing.”

He gestured behind him. And it was as if, somehow, Aaron had not seen or taken in the massive rumbling machine on the helipad behind us, grunting and snarling like a beast forced too far and hard through the night. His pallor drained to grey. He looked at me and back to the chopper, and I thought for a second he was going to pass out. His mask had cracked to dust. He just looked terrified. “Aaron,” I whispered and took a step towards him.

A grip closed on my arm. Larsen’s this time—nothing like Wycliffe’s friendly grasp. Larsen did not look the type of man who would let a stranger blag his way onto an oil rig. “Dave, I’ll talk to you later,” he said. “Get out of here for now.” To my surprise, once Dave was out of earshot, Larsen extended his free hand and took hold of Aaron’s wrist, the gesture gentle. “All right, West. Everyone’s fine, okay? Now—do you have any idea who this guy is?”

“I…Yes. Jens, I’m so sorry. This is Rosie’s brother. I’ve been worried he would pull some sort of stunt. He’s been distraught.”

Larsen turned to me. He looked as bewildered as I felt, but whatever Aaron was playing, I had to go with it. “Rosie’s…Oh Christ. Look, West—I don’t know how he got past security shoreside, but you know he can’t stay—”

“I know. I know. Just…let me talk to him, okay?”

“I should have him placed under arrest…”

“No.” Aaron shifted, placed himself subtly but solidly in Larsen’s path. “I understand, but…give me a while alone with him. He’s not dangerous, I swear. I’ll make him my responsibility.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. I felt my arm carefully removed from Larsen’s grip and transferred into the larger, stronger one I had hopelessly tried to envisage clasping me safe in the jolting chopper’s cabin. Now I had it, I found myself differently afraid. It was like steel. He turned me away and began to march me off towards a low block of buildings that ran along the platform’s far edge. Whether Larsen made an effort to follow us or not, I didn’t care. All I could feel was wave after wave of delayed shock and the horrible chill of Aaron’s grasp on me without affection. He could have been dragging off a hostile stranger.

For as long as the wind continued to tear at us, I remained silent, concentrating on staying upright and making some of the effort of this forced march look like my own. I was blind with tears. When we passed into the lee of the low block, I swiped my palm across my eyes and ground to a halt, obliging Aaron to stop too or pull me off my feet. He swung round on me. Whatever pain or fright the sight of the helicopter had caused him was gone, subsumed back into that cold mask. “What?”

“Please stop. Let me talk to you.”

“Oh, we’ll talk. But not out here, you fucking nutcase.” He gestured to the double doors behind him. “Inside. Now.”

To be out of the wind was a shattering relief. The doors clapped shut behind us like the last notes of a violent symphony. A hush fell, in which I could suddenly hear everything: the thud of my own heart, a high whine in my reverberating eardrums. Aaron’s breathing, regular and deep, a sound I had come to love beside me in the night, but which at the moment seemed more the respiratory discipline of a man trying not to lash out and kill me. I said, more for the sake of speaking than out of real interest, “Where…where are we?”

“Accommodation block five. Of the Kittiwake deep-sea rig. Terrorists have tried to board her, Matthew. Paratroopers on exercise and Rainbow fucking Warriors. And you…just hopped on the shuttle flight and came.”

“I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry. But I had to…” I didn’t get to finish. Aaron had stopped dead outside a door in a corridor not dissimilar to the one in his shore quarters. The floor was lined with rubber and steel, not mass-produced carpet, but it was just as anonymous. I wondered if that made it easier for him to go back and forth. Never accumulate anything, never leave anything or anyone behind…

The room I saw before me when he shoved open the door instantly killed that theory. It was only a cabin, about ten by ten, but I knew before he switched the light on. *My God, this is where you live.* There were pictures on the walls—mechanical sketches by da Vinci, huge geological maps. Designs for machines I didn’t recognise, beautifully executed in pencil and fine-line ink. As well as textbooks and classics, on these shelves were volumes I could imagine an ordinary man putting his feet up and reading to pass a rainy afternoon: blockbuster novels, Terry Pratchetts. I took it in almost with reluctance, grabbing at the edge of the desk to keep from falling. This was home.

Aaron shrugged out of his oilskins, stepped round behind me and helped me out of mine with about as much ceremony as if he were skinning a rabbit. He tossed them to one side and pulled out the chair from under the desk. He didn’t invite me to sit down, but the push he gave my shoulders was enough to make my knees buckle, as they’d been wanting to since the helicopter touched down. Turning away, he crouched beside a metal filing drawer and pulled out an unlabelled bottle. He broke the seal—it looked homemade—and sat down heavily on his bunk. The contents of the bottle were lucently clear, and the smell of it reached across to me like a clenched fist. Tipping it up—I saw with a twisting pain at my heart that his hand shook—he drank deeply, straight from the neck. Then he corked it back up again and returned it to its place in the drawer. “None for you, Amelia Earhart,” he said. “You’re on the wagon.” He pressed the backs of his fingers to his mouth for a second. Transfixed me with such a look that I almost wished myself back in the chopper again. “Right. Explain.”

I swallowed. I did not want to be afraid of him, and I didn’t understand quite why he was so bleakly furious. I’d done something stupid, but he must have worked out that I’d done it for him…“It was Joe,” I began, more or less at random. “He…bowled me over. I didn’t mean to let you leave like that. I had to see you. I wanted to tell you…” But before I told him that, I needed to know one thing myself. It shouldn’t have mattered. If I loved him, I loved him. Aaron had

been right a while back, though: I was in pieces; more pieces at least than could bear the weight of unassisted trust.

He was watching me in silence. “Aaron, please. Who’s Rosie?”

He drew a breath. Finally gave me a break from his gaze—looked out into the dark that lay beyond his cabin window. Eventually, he said, without inflection, “You know who Rosie is. You read my fucking e-mails, Matt.”

“I didn’t. I mean—Christ, yes, I did, and it was despicable. But I didn’t *go through* them. I only opened one. I thought…I thought she was your girlfriend, or even your wife. I thought—”

“My wife.” It was a flat echo. For a moment he looked at me again, and then he sank his face into his hands. “My…my wife. Okay. Did you see the date on your one e-mail?”

The date? No, I hadn’t. Beyond a few flaring, unforgettable phrases which had drifted through my mind ever since, I’d taken in very little. I shook my head. “No. Why?”

He pushed himself suddenly upright. I braced myself not to flinch as he strode over to the desk. He crouched by the chair where I sat, and pulled out a drawer. The desk itself was utilitarian, plastic and steel. Incongruously, this one drawer seemed to be lined in dark wool, as if he had folded a thick fisherman’s sweater into it. On top of the wool, carefully stacked, were a few photo frames. Aaron withdrew the largest of them and put it into my hands. “Andrew Rose,” he said, tapping the image smiling up at me. “Rosie. Like Westie, only…funnier, for a hard-arsed drill operator. He was also a brilliant draughtsman. Those are his mechanical drawings on the wall.” Aaron paused. His voice was calm, conversational, hardly suited to a revelation of this order. He pointed to the bookshelf. “That’s his crappy taste in literature over there. He brewed up rigger’s moonshine in a crate under his bed, which didn’t matter because he was hardly ever in it. He more or less lived in here.”

I looked at the photograph. An ordinary face—for about a second, until you saw the eyes. The uncertain, lopsided smile. He was poised on one of the gantry arms, oblivious to the hundred-foot drop below him into the North Sea, gazing

up at his photographer with pure love.

Pretty, dark-haired Rosie, with her house and her garden and everything else in the bubble I'd created to contain her, popped and disappeared. The room seemed to recede from all around me. I felt crass, naïve, and about six years old. I asked, through cold lips, knowing the answer, "Did he leave?"

"No. He was coming back from an off duty last February, and his shuttle helicopter went down. The sister ship, actually, to the one you rode out here tonight. He died. They all did. When I had to go out the other day, it was to hear the findings of the inquest. They couldn't prove pilot error. It was mechanical failure. So if you don't mind…" He took hold of the edge of the desk and levered himself upright. "If you don't mind, I'm sending you back on the supply boat. You'll have to wait around here for a couple of days, but…I'll go and talk to Larsen about it now."

I watched him make his way to the door. I had never seen him other than graceful, but now he moved as if his joints were hurting him. His head was down. He took hold of the heavy steel handle. "Aaron," I rasped, and wondered if he had heard. My mouth felt numb and sandy. "Aaron, please. Wait."

"What for?" He turned to me, his eyes hollow with desperation. "So I can tell you I hung about in gay bars for nine months hoping for someone to look enough like him that I could close my eyes and pretend? That I…keep his e-mails and read them and pretend that way? I've never told anyone, Matt. I never even meant for you to know his name."

"I didn't find out his name from the e-mails. You say it in your sleep."

He flinched. "What?"

"The first night I was with you, and…often since."

"I…I do?"

I had to lip-read it. His brow was furrowed. I saw that his cheeks were wet. Carefully I laid the photograph down on the desk and came to stand in front of him. He flung out a hand at me, a gesture of warding off, and I accepted it. "Yes. Often."

“Good, because when I met you—and you look nothing like him—and I started to feel the way I do about you, I thought I was beginning to forget…”

The way I do. My mind set that aside, though it felt like being thrown a handful of diamonds. “You’re not. You never will.”

“Good,” he repeated. Then, again, “You’re nothing like him. I thought at first…I was afraid it was just the state of you. Rosie never needed much looking after, God knows, and…”

“And you thought I did?”

“Yes, I…It felt good. But even that couldn’t last. I found out what had happened to you, and I saw how hard you were fighting—just to stay sane, to stay alive. Winning too.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Was I? Maybe after I met you…”

“No. You’d have been okay. You’re strong, Matt. Not in the same way Rosie was, but—you were open, *loving*, somehow, even after what Joe had done to you. I saw that soon enough. It wasn’t just—compassion, needing someone to care for. Then every time we touched one another, it felt better and better, until…” He shuddered to a halt. I waited, watching his fading colour in concern. Hearing this was life’s blood to me, but he didn’t sound steady. The hand he was holding out to me opened and closed in a sudden spasm. “You know, by the time I knew you’d read my fucking e-mails, I was almost pleased. Because…because you were guilty and miserable, and that meant I wasn’t the only one starting to fall in—Oh God—to fall in love. I realised that, and I thought—I think about Rosie, and it feels like only yesterday he died…” He watched for a moment unseeingly, his eyes dark and bewildered. Then he whispered, barely audible, “Fuck. I can’t breathe.”

“What?” I slipped past his outstretched hand and stood close to him. “What is it?”

“Don’t know. Just can’t…can’t get air in.”

For a second, panic seized me. Then, just as quickly, it died. I might be a fake

doctor here, but back on land I was a real one. I put a hand on his shoulder and listened to him. He was struggling—drawing short inhalations too high in his chest to do him much good—but I couldn't hear wheezing or fluid. People dropped into respiratory distress for dozens of reasons. Trauma, disease; sometimes just overwhelming, inexpressible pain. The sense of knowing what to do came back to me like the memory of a long-gone dream. "Okay," I said, reaching for the pulse in his wrist. It pounded hard beneath my fingertips, racing with his fear, but it was strong. "All right. This will pass. Can you come with me?"

He moved obediently when I took hold of his arm and guided him over to the bunk. I could feel him spiralling, the panic feeding on itself, and I ran a hand up and down his back. "Sit down for me." His lips were going blue. In a moment I would run and hit whatever alarm it took to get the rig's medical team down here, but I had one trick. "Okay. Now rest your elbows on your knees and put your head down."

"And what the fuck…is this meant to do?"

That was good: still talking, and irritation coming through the fright. "Opens your chest out," I told him. "Relaxes the bits that are trying to clog up. I get asthmatics to do it."

"Not an…asthmatic," he growled, but he suddenly drew a huge, half-drowned lungful of air. "Oh God."

"That's it. Again." I waited for the next inhalation and the next, and the third one became a grating sob. "Aaron, love…"

I reached for him, and he stiffened. "Nn-nn. Don't." His hand came out once more in that hopeless sign of rejection, pushing me away. I had thought he was trying to sidestep the breakdown beginning to overwhelm him, but finally I saw his problem. I had come out here, reenacting the trip which had killed his last lover, and taken a hammer to the shell in which he had been rebuilding his life. Coping. Surviving. Oh, and I'd begun my work long before that—needing him, making him be more to me than just the simple lay that would have done him good and left him with intact memories. Making him, never expecting any such development, begin to fall in love—long before he was ready for it. Getting

between him and his memories. I was the fucking problem. “Aaron, I’m sorry,” I whispered, hating the inadequacy of the words. “I am. I’ll clear out, okay? I’m so sorry—for all the stupid things I thought. For coming out here tonight especially. God, if I’d known what had happened…what had happened to Rosie, I’d never have…” I watched, paralysed, while another sob wrenched his frame, and he pulled back the hand and wrapped it round his nape, clenching, trying to curl up on himself. “I’ll leave you alone, okay?”

I didn’t know where I thought I was going to go, an illicit stranger on an oil rig in the middle of the North Sea, but that seemed a small concern. I could wander about aimlessly there as well as anywhere else, and when challenged, hand myself over to Larsen’s mercies, or the brig if they had one. I struggled with the cabin-door lock. Like everything else around here it was massive, heavy, cold and awkward to my hand, but eventually it gave, and I managed to shove it open, to squeeze through the gap and let it bang closed.

Chapter Eleven

I stood in the corridor, leaning on the metal wall. Outside of Aaron's cabin, with its trappings of civilisation, humanity, I became once more aware of the huge industrial structure around me. And beyond that, the wider ocean. A wave of disassociation began in my marrow and gut. I thought I could see myself from outside—feckless, shivering, displaced by two hundred miles, a waste of sea, from everything I knew. Aaron had said I was strong—and I knew, on some level, that he was right, or that at least I would have crawled out from under the loss of Joe and lived some kind of a life, or fallen back into Joe's arms and lived another kind, both types of them shadows. I would have lived as so many men do, never dreaming of anything better. I would live now, God knew. Was it better to know what I would be missing?

I pushed myself to my feet. I had to go somewhere. I was glad—astonished—that Aaron had loved me; that he'd felt that way even for a second. But I had no illusions—knew I would never match up to what he'd lost. I started to walk, back in the direction that would lead me out into the night.

Behind me, a cabin door swung wide, hard enough to bang off the wall. There was obviously a trick to it. If you worked here, you must learn it fast enough, I thought, coming to a helpless stop in the middle of the corridor. I should keep walking. There were dozens of possible doors, and I'd made enough of an arse of myself for one night. Maybe I'd ask whoever was coming out of his cabin behind me where the canteen was, or where the fuck I should go to hide out and wait for the supply boat. I heard, on a raw exhalation, "Matthew!"

I turned around. Aaron had half fallen out into the corridor; was clinging to the open door to keep upright. His beautiful face was contorted with tears. "Matt, where…where are you going?"

"I don't know," I said faintly. "I just thought I should…"

"Don't. Please. Please don't go."

I ran to him. He reached out and seized me the second I was within arm's

reach, and I flung a rough embrace around him. Together we stumbled back into the cabin, and I heaved the door closed behind me with one hand, feeling muscles wrench in my shoulder. He was hurting me too, dragging us both down to the floor as his knees gave. I had never been so glad of any pain. I didn't know how to hold him, how to get my arms round him tight enough. I was down on my knees, where I had dropped after running to him, and his hands were twisting in the fabric of the damned survival suit, bruising my ribs. I didn't want him touching that. I wanted to give him my skin, my flesh and bone, but I couldn't move until this tempest passed and he released me. Gasping, hearing my crushed efforts to breathe intertwine with the sounds of his grief, I stroked his hair, kissed his ear and the side of his neck, the contact clumsy and hot. "Aaron, love! I'm so sorry!"

"What the hell for?" he sobbed. "You came out here—did all that—for me. I still don't…fucking believe it."

"Well, I'm here. I'm here. Come on, sweetheart—up you get, up off this cold floor. Can you…?"

I don't know if he hauled me up or if I surged to meet him. Once there, his arms locked round me so fiercely I could not imagine ever being parted from him, and I grabbed him in return, one arm around his waist, supporting him. We made our clumsy way across the short distance to the single bunk; went down in a bone-bruising tangle onto its unyielding mattress. "Don't leave me," he choked out. I rolled on top of him, scrambled to stay with him, to be his shield—his place to hide, because I knew that as much as he needed this, it wasn't bearable to him. "Matthew. Matthew. Don't leave."

Midnight, on the deep-sea Kittiwake. I heard Aaron's bedside clock beep and saw the digits change to zero. Then I couldn't pay that or anything else much attention; he was naked in my arms, my thighs clasped round him, both of us rocking softly, inexorably closer to climax. The bunk was barely built to contain one normal-sized male, let alone the passions of two, and I could feel every slat on my spine as he pushed down against me, but I'd have stayed there forever if I could.

Moonlight and arc lights shone into the room. I could see his smile and the

sweet heated brilliance it set in his eyes. For the first time I could see clearly the beautiful rose tattoo that snaked across his shoulder, following its powerful curve. I thought about how many times we'd made love with the lights off, or with Aaron stripped down to his shirt but stopping there. I hadn't considered why: he was just sexy like that, the one retained garment setting off his nakedness, clinging to him damply as we worked up the heat. I ran my fingers over it now, tentatively, glancing up for permission. Gasped as he went still, took his weight on one arm and captured my hand in his free one.

He pressed my palm flat to the rose. "I had it done my first shore leave… after," he said. "Got rat-arsed in Edinburgh, and…" He smiled, leaned down to kiss me. "Larsen was with me, supervising. He held me down, made sure the guy did a good job."

"He did," I managed. "It's perfect."

He shook his head. "You're fucking perfect. That's the only thing that's perfect around here." He began to move again, and I let my head fall back on the pillow, arching and arching my spine to meet him. Outside, wild white drifts of snow had started to fall, driven by the wind. It hadn't occurred to me that it snowed out at sea, in lonely wastes of water with no one to watch. I was falling upwards into it, up and…

"Christ, Aaron!"

"What's the matter?"

"It moved! It—the rig. I felt it move."

"It's meant to. Haven't you been up in a tower block in a gale? It's structured to give a bit."

"Oh, I…Okay. I see."

"Happy now?"

Happy now. Yes, in the darkly twining leaves of the rose. I kept my hand pressed to it, just above his heart. I wrapped my other arm around his neck and opened my thighs for him, clinging to him. I'd wanted him inside me, but when

he started to move again, I couldn't think of anything beyond the feel of it, the heat and the velvety urgency, his shaft crushed to mine, the pain and the joy of it rocking us over the top in the stupendous wind-driven sway of the rig.

His clock beeped again. One in the morning. Something occurred to me, on the edge of blackout sleep. "Hey. Happy Christmas."

Silent laughter shook him. I was well placed to feel it, pinned beneath him, melting and boneless in his warmth. "You've got to be kidding, but…All right. You too."

"Ta. Can you reach my jacket from there?"

"You *cannot* be cold."

"Just give me it."

I found the ring deep in one pocket, after a heart-stopping struggle. So much had happened. The damn landing had been so rough, I couldn't remember the moment when I'd let go my death grip on the box and tucked it away. It felt to me now as if the whole world depended on finding its smooth, silky curve, and my fingertips closed on it tight.

I drew it out and looked at the gleaming silver over his shoulder. He took his weight on his elbows and pushed up with a faint exhausted grunt. "What is it, love?"

"This," I said, trailing it lightly down between his shoulder blades. "Opened it on the helicopter. It stopped me freaking out—more or less, anyway."

He rolled onto his side. For a moment he watched me and the glimmering circle; then he put out a hand. "Here. Let me see." I gave it to him carefully. For a long while he turned it over between his fingers, silver in the silver light. "You must have thought I was…off my head," he said softly. "Running off and buying you this."

I wondered how he still could have doubts. About me, anyway, and how I felt for him. His free arm was tucked beneath my neck. His ankle was wrapped round mine in a kind of postcoital lock, and our bellies were sticking together in

drying semen. Oh God, maybe the doubts were his own—we were lying here in the bed he had shared with Rosie, and if I'd wanted to try and assure him I'd never trespass on the sacred ground of that lost love, I couldn't be going a worse way about it…I wanted him, even after all we'd shared, to know himself free. "Well, a world's changed since you did," I said. "You can cop an insanity plea if you want. I wouldn't blame you."

He looked at me, incredulity painting his beautiful face. Then he rolled back down beside me, cushioning my head on his shoulder. "What happened to you?" he whispered. "Was it Joe who made you feel like a man would have to be nuts to fall in love with you? Give me your stupid hand." I obeyed, unable to speak. He shifted, made me comfortable in his embrace. I'd given him my stupid left, and he took it in both of his, separating the fingers in the strange mixed light. Joe and I had never gone through this. I realised with a flush that I'd picked up my radical stance on the subject from him. I had no bloody problem at all with the feel of the cool, heavy silver sliding into place, a perfect fit, the symbol and the gesture as old as time.

On a cold day in March, I went with Aaron to a windswept graveyard in the Cumbrian hills. We had to look for the right place, which surprised me, but I kept quiet and stayed by his side while we threaded the lines of headstones. When he had laid down the flowers he'd brought, he straightened up and looked at me. It was perishing cold. The grey sky had chased all the green from his eyes. "I didn't go to the funeral," he said. "His parents are Catholic. If they'd found out, it would have consigned their son to hell for them."

I thought about Aaron, and the considerable deal I now knew about Andrew Rose, and tried to imagine how the union of those two loving souls had added up to perdition. I said cautiously, not sure of the propriety here among the sleepers, "That's…that's all bollocks, you know."

He smiled, a faint jade kindling under his lashes. "He used to worry about it. So much sometimes, he almost made me wonder. But…I do know now." He put out his hand to me. If he wasn't concerned about the rightness of gathering me in and kissing me here, nor was I, and I felt a sudden bone-deep conviction that nothing under this sky or these hills would deny us. Would do anything other than assent to the song, the fragile heat of this shared touch. I strove to make it

stronger. He was shivering against me. Coming here had cost him an effort that had drained him from the marrow. I wrapped my arms around him. “Aaron…”

We went back to the car, uncomfortably poised at an angle on the verge of the single track. It was a sturdy little runabout Ford we’d bought between us, so that when he was home on his off-duty fortnights—and this was the third one we’d shared—we could get out of the city, see the Lakes and Peaks and Pennines we’d both loved growing up. We’d already crashed her on Shap, spinning off the road into a snowdrift. I loved her. Getting in, I wondered what it was he was about to tell me. There was something—he’d started on the road out here, but his heart had been too full, and he’d shaken his head and asked me to wait. He was ready this time, I knew. And it was serious. I adjusted the seat and the mirror from his long-legged driving position, and I waited still, feeling colder here than I had out in the wind.

I was afraid. Staring out through the snow-flecked windshield, I found myself playing back the months that had passed since my night on the Kittiwake. I had not faced a firing squad the morning after, and nor had Aaron made me take the long road home by sea—Larsen had given him a day’s leave to escort me back on the Puma, and I’m not sure which of us had been more terrified at the prospect, but in fact I had loved the trip to shore, my hand clenched in his as we rode clear skies all the way. Since then, of course, it had been my turn to die inside a bit each time he journeyed out or home. It was part of the game.

The relationship game. I knew I had never learned its rules. I had grown up inside my first one, and once cut adrift, had only picked up protocols for one-night stands. We had gone too fast, Aaron and I. Here on the hillside, with the earth still settling around Rosie’s grave, I was sure of it. During his fortnights ashore, we spent every available second together. I was living, more or less illegally, in his company flat. When he was away, my chest ached and my eyes hurt and I went through my days like a zombie.

I had tried not to. I stayed on my wagon, did my job with a kind of mechanical fervour that sailed me through my foundation exams. I tried to live well. When Lou had asked me to meet up with him—in a restaurant; there would be no more Powerhouse nights for me—I went. I listened to him for about an hour. He only had a little to say, but I understood from his circuits and repeats how urgently he would have liked it to sound better. He’d kept Joe’s secrets in order to ally

himself with him, to be there to make the catch when—as he had believed was inevitable—the dream of the straight life with Marnie bit the dust. Losing hope there, and seeing me still on my own, he had started to think he might have a chance with the other half…He had tailed off, and I had gone round to sit in his half of the booth and put my arm around him, because by then the poor bastard had been crying. Joe and I had never understood, he told me, how it felt to grow up looking in from the outside at the pair of us. I could well believe it. We were friends again, of a kind.

He had wanted me to meet with Joe. The offer on the flat had fallen through, and it was standing empty. I supposed there were things we should talk about. But that had been too hard. Joe had gone quietly home to Marnie on that Christmas Eve, and knowing him, she never saw the join. I hoped not. Lou had told me she was pregnant. I hoped that would make the difference to Joe, pay him off for his gamble. I hoped he would be happy, but I was quite sure I never wanted to lay eyes on him again.

Aaron was all I wanted. I had counted days and walked into his arms when he came home, and broken all the rules. Was this where I paid? He was pale in the passenger seat beside me, arms folded over his chest. He said, “I still love him, Matt.”

I nodded. I’d have loved him too if I’d had the chance. They had met at college, Rosie and Aaron, and had been settling in for life. “I know.”

“When he died, I didn’t know what had hit me. My…my fucking hair started to go grey, like in some stupid film. Overnight. Can you believe that?”

I turned to him. I put out a hand, making it be steady, and gently brushed his crown of stars. “Yeah, I can. It’s all right, love. Just talk.”

He frowned and seemed to come back from a distance. “Well, I meant to,” he said. “But not about that. Listen, Matt—I’ve had an offer of a job, and…it’s good, but it’s a tough one to call, and…”

A job. Of course. I could not help myself: I shifted back to stare out over the countryside and after a moment put my face into my hands. The oil industry could take him anywhere, couldn’t it—his alternative energy concepts probably

further still. He was, as I had rapidly worked out, something approaching a genius. He and Rosie could have worked together. The only time I felt inadequate in his company was when he was leafing through the books of technical drawings Rosie had left behind, many of them sketches that brought Aaron's ideas to life. Okay. I had thought myself bad off having to do without him for his North Sea months. I might soon be looking down the barrel of a year in Brazil—or forever, because what did I have that could hold him? "Where?" I said miserably.

"Er…That's the thing. They're a new outfit, setting up shop near Seascale. In one of the disused Sellafield nuclear labs, as it happens. They're looking at ways of decommissioning old power stations, cleaning them up and securing them. Finding better ways to use them in the future. I'd have a long commute, but…I'd be home every night, and I don't know how you'd feel about that. Living with me day in, day out—I might be more fun in small doses, you know…"

I lifted my head. I echoed unsteadily, "*Seascale?*"

"Yeah. In Cumberland. Be a pain in the arse to get to, I know. But they're offering a fortune. I could…If you want, I could buy Joe out of his half of your flat. I know how much it means to you, and…Matthew, sweetheart. What on earth's the matter?"

I scrambled over the handbrake to get to him. He caught me halfway, lifting, preventing me from doing myself an injury. "Fuck the flat!" I sobbed. "I never want to see the place again. I just want…"

I couldn't get further, but he knew. His arms were closing around me. He said, breathlessly, crushed and shaken with laughter, "Okay! We'll find somewhere in between the coasts. I hear Hexham's nice…Oh, Matt, what did you think I was going to say?"

About the Author

Harper Fox weaves her stories from her home in rural Northumbria in the UK. She loves northern England all the more because it is the country of her adoption—her grandfather came here as a refugee from Lithuania during the Second World War. The landscape inspires her to poetry of the magical-realist kind, and her work has appeared in several British literary magazines. She is not quite sure why the area also inspires her to erotic M/M prose, but she doesn’t look the gift horse in the mouth.

Harper has been published by Carina (her first success), Samhain Publishing and Loose Id. She has written M/M stories all her life, and she hid them in drawers until the hard drive was invented. She loves being able to share her romances with a readership now, as well as the backgrounds they’re set against, which are some of her favourite places in the UK.

She is lucky enough to have lived for the past twenty-four years with her SO, Jane. She isn’t that old, really—they met when they were very young. Honest.



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ISBN: 978-1-4268-9036-9

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